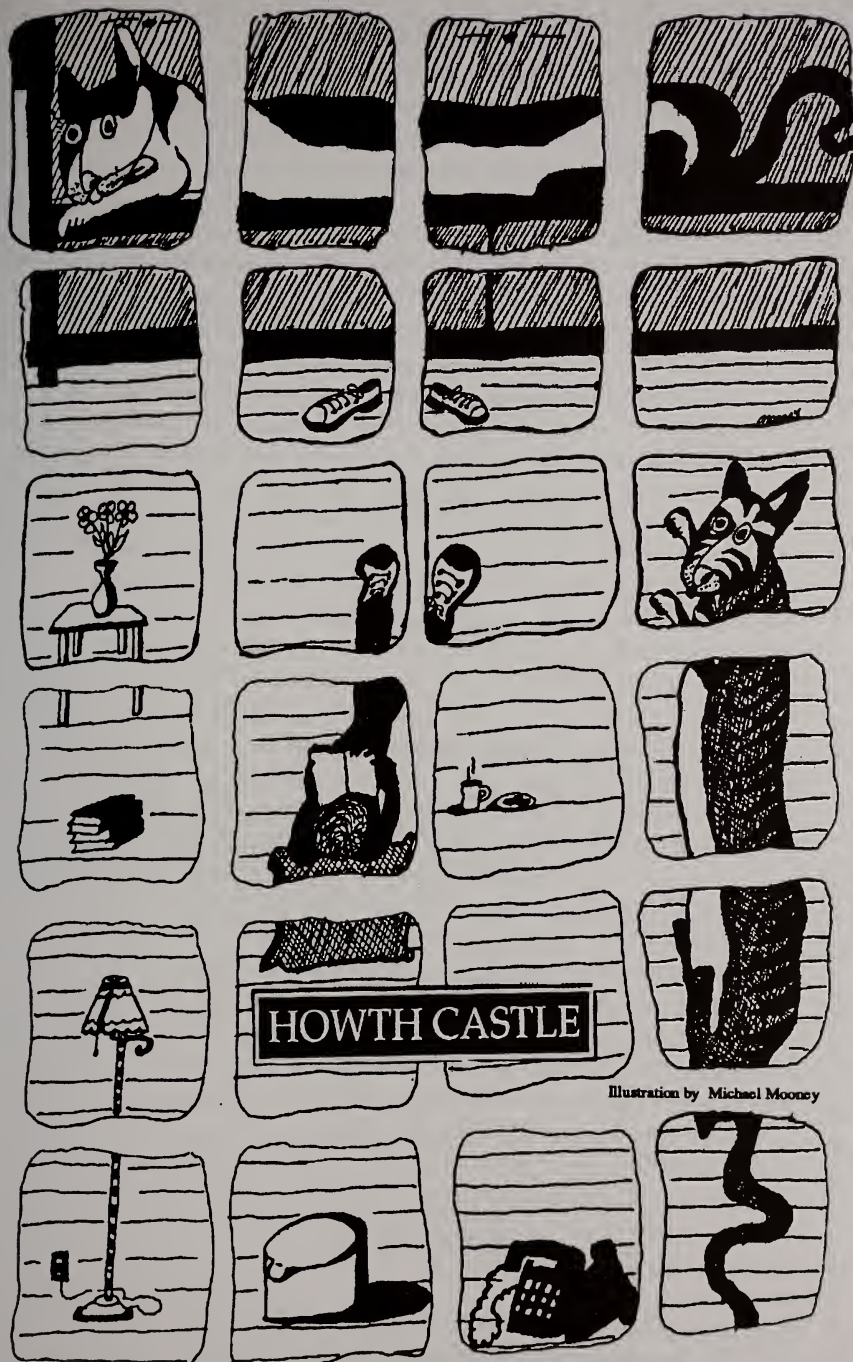




Howth Castle
1992-1993



HOWTH CASTLE

Illustration by Michael Mooney

HOWTH CASTLE

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Editor's Note

This issue is dedicated to Peter Harvey (1968-1992), a graduate of the UMass/Boston English program and assistant poetry editor of the 1989/90 *Howth Castle*. Peter was an accomplished writer of fiction and poetry, and was especially skilled at conveying "the truth" about human life—that it's trivial, heartbreaking and often horrific, but simultaneously beautiful, rewarding and, most important to Peter, extremely humorous if you have the correct point of view. Many people at UMass, faculty as well as fellow students, are saddened by Peter's death, and we at *Howth Castle* would like to join them in expressing sympathies to Peter's family. Mr. and Mrs. Harvey, Peter's parents, have generously established a creative writing award through the English Department in his memory.

Howth Castle has acquired the Lillian Lorraine Jones Memorial Prize, formerly awarded by the English Department to a graduating senior. Lillian Jones died in 1986, during her second year at UMass/Boston. The prize was established by Mrs. Helen Pfeifer, Lillian's mother. Based on ballots tallied during this year's selection process, the prize has been awarded to the work of fiction which received the most votes: "Fallen Time" by Eric Beeman. Congratulations, Eric!

The next piece of news is that it seems (knock on wood!) we won't have to move our office this year. Consequently, interested submitters for next year's issue should leave their work at our current address: McCormack Building, 5th floor, room 407, ph/617-287-7960 or c/o Student Life, Wheatley Hall, 4th floor, room 174, ph/617-287-7950.

For all submissions include a cover letter indicating the title(s), your name, address, phone number and student ID number. The submission should have printed on it only your ID number and the title—nothing else—no name, phone number, etc. We cannot accept submissions which do not follow these guidelines. The deadline for all submissions is the last day of classes of the Fall semester.

Written work (poetry, fiction and essays) must be typed, double-spaced, and no more than 4,500 words. Print your ID number and the title on each page.

Art work (line drawings, paintings, collages, etc.) must be submitted as color slides (title, ID# and viewing direction indicated on the bottom) or black and white photographs (title, ID# written on back). We cannot accept originals, except for b/w etchings and other prints (title, ID# on back). If necessary, we will refer you to a competent art photographer. If you're submitting b/w photography, please provide a print and not the original, and write the title and your ID number on the back.

Almost the entire editorial board of *Howth Castle* is graduating this June (pats on the back all around—*pat! pat!*). Students interested in working on next year's journal should contact our office or Donna Neal at Student Life for more information.

We'd like to thank the Student Senate; Chris West and *The Mass Media* staff; the Art Department faculty and staff, especially John Gianvito for his advice over the last few years; the English Department; Martha Collins and Lloyd Schwartz of the Creative Writing Program for their example, encouragement and support; the Student Life staff; and, of course, Donna Neal, always the calm at the center of the storm—we couldn't have done it without you, Donna!

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SRINIGAR

A kingfisher shrieks
rice pans rattle

first prayers sung
skim Dal Lake

The weed women
fill their shikaras—

Lotuses clinging with mist
piled in waxy heaps

cool and green behind
the lengths of head scarfs.

I think of my dead

brother and my
sister cradling her
swollen stomach
whispering bastard
alone behind our
garage, my father
walking around the
yard holding a small
stick wiping
sweat from his
face with a
snotrag.
This car kept
driving by our
house, the man
looking in the
yard, at all the
cars, at my
family sitting on
the front porch, and my
brother in law locked
eyes with him once, and
the guy didn't come back.
The coroner took 3
hours to get
there and take
photographs and take
him down and out
of the cellar and
wasn't it a good
thing that my
brother was so
precise?
The family gets
stuck with
cleaning up, and
this way I only had
to take care of
the stool.

I was standing by
the cellar door but
they told me to go
sit on the front porch
with the rest of my
family, so now I'm
leaning on the
railing watching
my sister biting her
nails and I'm wondering
whether it'll be a
girl or a boy

This way

it usually happens like this,
you know what I mean—
no, of course I don't he says
she says oh
please she says stop
this she says you
don't even like me, you don't
think I'm pretty she says
you don't, do you?
and like I said from the start,
it usually happens this way—
oh fuck this he says, you and
me, and he makes for the door, pauses
on the handle waiting for her
to say something, and when she
laughs at him,
he looks at her laughing
and slams the door hard,
as if he won't see her again

AIX-EN-PROVENCE

The night train
rushed me through waving, yellow
fields to the city, and I came
banging late at your door
but what else could I do
after that Picasso postcard
with your beckoning address
which I held up to your face
and you took me inside—the language
of our desperate letters came
to life. In the morning I went to get fresh
bread down the cool, narrow street,
light ribbons falling
across dirty buildings,
shutters banging and waving
and you, leaning in the shadow
of your room as I looked back.

PASTA GLORY

a haiku sequence

"You eat more pasta than the average Italian family."—A.J.

In the frying pan,
thick mushrooms brown like pasty
children at the beach,

voracious wheels of
zucchini absorb dancing
rivulets of oil

a soft wooden spoon
persuades curled onion slices
into hooking twists.

Boiling water takes
the rigid strands down in a
slow, softening suck—

white and sticky coils
overlap like fingers of
two lovers' wet hands.

Glorious pasta,
clothed in organic wrappings,
you ruin a fork.

THE COLOR OF AUTUMN MARIGOLDS

"These are the graves
of colored people.
Up here all by themselves."

He made an arc
with his cane
(I carried the wooden bucket)

as if they stood before him.
"It's what they wanted. And
no stones." His nose

dribbled like a child's
in the north wind.
"There were more,

but they been washing out
in the big storms.
Even the finches

haven't much of a place
anymore. But they were good people,
I remember when they came."

We walked around the eight
sunken rectangles cloaked
in wind-bent grass

the color of autumn marigolds.
"This fella'll be next,"
pointing to the grave closest

the edge. "I guess it won't be
long before they're all gone—
like they were never here."

He took the bucket from me.
"I believe the blueberries
will be good this year."

heir apparent

first

I'll write a book
and publish it myself
so I can use Toxic
Sculpture as a title

then

I'll buy land on
Ellesmere Island and
(just to be a bitch)
build a ranch-style
house on the permafrost

and then

I'll dye my hair
to match my luggage

TIDBITS

Beginning with a brief note on
what we've dubbed "Directional Dyslexics"
whose lefts are always rights and rights
are never rights and
it's late, we've headed back to the party.
There's blood on the tablecloth
and the blender's gone.
One by one we mingle and
nobody seems to care about bad
breath or cigarettes. Amy says
Will looks like a fetal pig and
the search goes on. Everybody
wants to know or be
somebody. Everybody
is an Actor slash Model, a Writer,
a Heart Valve Salesman. I want
deeper. I begin my hunt.

"Pete this is Plex."

"What do you do Plex?"

"I play."

"Play Plex?"

"Piano."

"Oh."

And did I tell you
the bartender's name is B,
spelled B-O, and
he has the dubious honor of having created
"The Bloody Margarita."

He California babbles to me:

"Dude, I need some doobage."

"No can do."

"Dude, my finger!"

"Wrong Dude, Bo."

"Dude!"

"Just chill Bo."

On and on the thoughts wail.
"Fingers and blenders don't mix."
"Did anyone drink it?"
"Ole, the Perfect Margarita!"
"Was it whipped or frapped?"
Morbid? Maybe, but I wish I'd
seen his face.

Somewhere we'd lost Will. The Soiree
Search Party mobilized.
"Will, where were you?"
"But don't you understand, Guys.
The walls were singing, the carpet
kept kissing my feet."

LIQUID DOMINOES

The days are all like one another. They're warm and the sun shines, showing that the earth is just slightly cracked and a touch more brittle as the days pass. The cracks manifest in the strangest places; in sidewalks, along pre-mesozoic faults, in telephone calls. And they come at the strangest times. Like right now, for instance. Right now the sun has just set and the sky has taken on that eerie royal blue. There is a plane that might be a star and it is trailing a little leader of iridescence that coats the eyes like sweet-sweet honey. And like every other night it is warm. And it has taken on the same characteristic cracks of the day but a little more gracefully. Gradations less forcefully. The cracks manifest in stratified clouds drifting and tugging the eyes out along the horizon. They sit and whisper to the ocean. The days pass and they are all alike; falling, liquid dominoes.

MY FATHER'S BIG TOE

My father's big toe and the next toe were fused.
He felt he was a monster
and when my Aunt Fanny, a hunchback
would take him into ladies' bathrooms
people would stare.
He thought they stared at him
because he was a freak.

My grandmother, who knew nothing of motherhood,
gave my father Jerry to Fanny to care for
Because she had to mind the store
because my grandfather would give away the business.
He was a bum.

(She called him "Lyuba", a nickname for Louis,
and people thought she called him "lover",
and said, "How nice that she calls him lover
after all these years")

My grandfather, the lover, taught my father to swim
by throwing him off a boat.
Louis was like a seal in water, but one of his lungs had to be removed
because of felt particles from the hats he made.
Jerry was small, not athletic, and did not float well.
He was a master at ping-pong but no one knew it.

Jerry went to Fordham, a Jesuit citadel, which accepted Jews
when many would not. Hitler,
another man with ideas about quotas and Jews,
triggered a war which scooped my father up
like the tornado in "The Wizard of Oz" and deposited him in Arizona.
In a steel cage in the desert,
he interrogated S.S. prisoners.

Armed with arcane knowledge about information retrieval and human
motivation, he finished Fordham, married my mother, and fathered
John, Matthew, Daniel,
and Gabriel (an afterthought).
John married a manic-depressive and dresses up in armor to fight mock duels.

Daniel teaches college students in Canada, sails, plays soccer, is never wrong.
Gabriel is a minister; rejecting both Catholic mother, and Jewish Jerry, he is father
to his flock.

Matthew has been in therapy for endless years of talk, paints, and writes poetry
about his relationship with his father.

REMBRANCE OF TASTES PAST

Reversing the action of Proust's madeleine and tea,
the memories of yesterday's repasts trigger glorious
tastes and smells.

I recall jumbo sundaes
sweet and cold

racks of ribs, meat falling off the bone
deep-fat fried onion rings, shrimp, clams, and french fries
grease soaking brown paper.

I swam through oceans of jello and pudding,
waded in lagoons of sherbet and junket

basked on shores of crusty bread and sun-warmed
butter

climbed mountains of meat loaf, labored up slopes of
mashed potato, turnip, squash.

I traveled too, to exotic eating places, Thai, Szechuan, Sicilian,
and Ethiopian
no cuisine too daunting, no spice too hot,
I never met a meal I didn't like.

I sit eating
tofu mixed with salsa
bales of salad
dreaming of menus and today's specials.

THE BERRY IS BLACK

The berry is black at the back
Of the shadowy thorn-maze,
Drawing to itself
A prodigal drop of sun.

The berry is black in the crack
Of the tumbling wall-stones,
Ripened and ready for mulling
And making of jam.

The berry is black in the track
Of a foraging jackdaw.
His long beak prying,
His black wing, pierced by its spines.

The berry is black in the sack
Of a heavy day's harvest,
And soon in the belly
Of a boy who doesn't drink tea.

LIMESTONE BONES

My limerock stock climbed
Out of the pale and into the begrudging west
Aboard a cast-off coracle
With mouths full of catechism
And spit tainted crimson,
Bellies full of pipe smoke,
Carrageen, and cockles.
The limebed bred
From crops of withered stone
The sea-fearing, the God-faring,
And the warring clans
Who gathered in a human delta,
And dispersed perennially
On a national pilgrimage of vagrancy.
Now my limestone bones long
For the return of the rain
And the onslaught-ocean
That sculpted from the shell-sand land
Them and this mountebank-muse,
This drag-about desire...
My love of that spiteful miserly scrag
Afloat in a zig-zag sea.

HE CAME FROM ATHLONE

He came from Athlone to New York with nothing
But trousers strung loosely about his scrawny arse
And five shillings with luck one day owned a bar
The likes of Jack Diamond drew.

By jaysus, tough it was, and tougher than gooseberries in June
On the two sides of the blue highway
For one more cigarette under a tweed hat
Smoldering with the will of a great man;

Laboring with a keen heart one day also, would return
To the home of homes and walk smart on his own shore;
Whistling like the wind on the reedy Shannon;
Telling time by the coordinate of a familiar sun.

He piled stones into walls spawning tales of treasure.
Molly White over the barnyard pond wailed in mad song,
At midnight dragging souls into the murk and holidays
In the bog on bed of peat on pillow of heather on Sunday morning slept.

The grass was greener, greener now than the sky
Was blue and grey when the air gripped the earth
With cold mists and then mushrooms grew
In sheepfields, like eggs in a clutch.

The turf shed full of sod housed the dogs
Watched the world hung on rain.
Cows wagged their veiny udders, licked drizzly noses
And drank from the dreary brown of puddles.

The sweet stink of silage, rattling of combines and soft boiled eggs
Were the sacred stuff that neater than his silver fob he went about.
But, when the jackdaw crowed he was weak,
And sad was the song his tongue could not sing.

Yet, his sorrow was true, honest as a blackthorn in wrestling
 thickets is dark.

Sure as great lives are simple and firm like earth,
So too was each of his days great,
And the whole of it greater even than that.

TO MY UNCLE

On t.v., they coat a D.C. lawn
with that massive quilt
Bowed heads wander the borders
of the great mosaic

It was my father who called
and told me you had died
It wasn't exactly the message
that got to me
It's just the connection was so bad
he couldn't hear me
shouting replies
which wanted to be spoken softly

And now watching t.v.,
I am wondering could someone ever
cocoon your butterfly life
any real person's life
into a small square of material
and wondering at how some emotions
well up
like a strange hot liquid.

VACATION

On your shelves
Ivory from China, statues from Israel.
Books, Getting Well, Feeling Good, The Jewish Book of Why,
Why Bad Things Happen To...

Propped like a billboard
On the top shelf, an old black and white
Of you.
Poised like a fallen tissue on a flowered carpet.
White cotton blouse hanging off one shoulder
Beneath a smooth, eager face.

A brass mask of Tragedy looms behind
A picture of your parents — Austrian immigrants in black.
No Comedy to balance it.

On your wall
Three lights shine down
On eleven pictures of your son's work — "public art"
And one picture of your son.

Sometimes he talks as if you were still here.
On vacation perhaps, while we take ours in your apartment,
Your home.

Just three months have passed.

He's given me some of your jewelry.
Your colored beads, your swirling pins.
I try not to take more than I need.
I love your son.

I might have been afraid
of you in life.
I've met you twice
In dreams.
You liked me there.

BLACK BIRDS

I went in the dim light throwing everything I could get my hands on into my shopping cart, pushing as fast as I could and my body was pulled faster and faster by the weight of my groceries, until I was light as a feather, flying. "Where are you taking me?! I have to clean my house because my mother is coming! I have to be there." And the Quaker Oats and the bananas and the Coca-Cola and the chicken livers and the saltines, they turned into black birds humming, moaning like women in mourning. Flapping their wings very gently at first, then harder like they were trying to fly, they were hurting themselves unable to move, and their feathers stuck through the chrome grid of the shopping cart, and their cries became sharper, angry. "This is not what I asked for! This is not what I wanted!" I took the birds one by one holding their bodies with my two hands, and as I did, I saw how dirty they were. There were feathers missing in places and they kept flapping their wings, stretching them out and hitting my face, knocking things over as I made my way through the aisles trying to remember where I got them. I was running and my shoes were coming off. I almost fell over, into a stack of canned tomatoes, and hurt my leg. My hands would not let go of the birds, and the lights went out. And I stopped. I could feel the fleas crawling up my arms. And I could hear them wailing aisles away and the sound was deeper and deeper. "No, no, stop! They'll find me! Stop!" It was a baby crying.

i kinda knew the song

well, it sounded familiar. but all the reverb made it all kinda fuzzy. that and the amps were a little beaten up. so the guitar kinda twanged a real high TWANG. but what i didn't know was that originally it was a modern lovers' tune. i had heard of the band. but i had never seen them live. so i wouldn't know that on stage it wasn't them but that the song was theirs. he looked at me. his pale blue eyes were lost in a smoky haze. they looked kinda dusty, almost grey. i waved my hand. his eyes followed the quick fleshy flash, like a white glove trying to wipe it all away. when i asked about the song he touched me lightly on my bare shoulder and i kinda quivered. my skin was sun-burned from my afternoon hike to the observatory at griffith park. up the winding hillside highway i was cat-called by a car-full of hispanic teenagers skipping school to, like me, enjoy the view. well, it was that sort of look and feel of such sweet, late-night, slam-rock, close-bodied, dim-lit acceptance that i knew it would of been o.k. if i didn't even know who pablo picasso was. this was it. my last night in l.a. the spiderbabies live at raji's hollywood u.s.a. and a puffy cheeked blonde who spent his childhood chomping on corn husk, forking hay. though i didn't know exactly. i promised not to ask where he came from. his fingerprints marred the perfection of a dull foggy glaze, like a layer of skin, on a chilled amber bottle, as he passed it my way. and then he smiled as if under a straw hat and i saw him with the same ripped jeans, bare-thick-padded-big-toed feet, walking a delayed soft skip under a creamy break-of-day eternal sky and felt a thin dry wind tying his throat up in knots. somewhere in corn country. i closed my eyes to the curve-beat, boot-thump-dance, lonely-beer-sip, pick up line, and he dropped me off with out any kinda kiss good-bye.

If everyone is paperdolls

attached, contourless,
a string of beads, an accordian
of flat souls...I hope
I'm the doll at the end,
with purple crayon outline,
and one hand free.

WINTER MOON

The winter moon, a ball of snow-fire, hangs
somehow above us. It pulls at my body,
reaches through the drapeless window,
its icy flames whisper, "freedom"...you
pull me from the moon, your skin burns, like
a rough blanket against my cheek...but
at least I am warm.

MY GRANDMOTHER'S SPIDERS

My big brother said cancer was
a crab, but I think it's spiders.
They hide under the purple flowers
of her nightgown, and I think they must be
in her mouth, muffling her words.

My grandmother shrinks under a forest
of legs—some are twisting on her face.
They reach out from her sleeve,
 but I can't crush them—
their webs would grab me, or stick like glue.

I sit smaller in my chair
beside her clean, electric bed,
afraid the spiders hear me breathe.

SLIP

a freudian slip I
suppose.
and you looked at me like I'd
slapped your face or
kicked your dog or
yelled at your grandmother or
slept with your brother or
thrown out your roses or
stolen candy from a child or
cut holes in your underwear or
spit on your grave or
published your diary or
rained on your parade or
ran over a cat
on purpose.

you looked at me like I
was the devil
and I wished I
could flick
my serpent
tongue to the table to
retrieve and swallow those
words.

but now they are out there.

THE ADAM AND EVE STUFF

It was late September and we had
Adam and Eve over for dinner.
Isn't it keen we're having
such a lovely fall?

They agreed only they didn't
like being kicked out of the garden.
They had really been into the immortal stuff.
Now they had the knowledge bit and had
seen they were naked. Adam was wearing
Levi jeans and a black leather jacket,
he had a bike, Eve rode in back. She
wore a tight leather jumpsuit that
barely kept her inside.

They said being smart wasn't all it's
cracked to be. But they'd rather on
the whole be smart and die than be
stupid as bunnies.

We played cards and Adam shot the moon.
I kept trying to put the make on Eve
but she would have none of it. She
was still in the monogamy problem.

I tried to get them used to things
like shopping and red lights.

We had a garden in back where
they could sit and feel more comfortable.

Now we have these two naked people
in our yard trying to find lost magic.

THE OPERATOR

When I hear a voice like his
I want it to play on my Walkman.
He sounds like brewed French Roast.
I can hear a romantic red
as if he'd something fertile to say.
I want to ask if I'm the
number that would spin his number?

We could marry at the local gas station.
Fill up and take off for
Montreal where the French sings.
Where the women are as aware of their
walk as a gymnast on the balance beam.

Love would drip from our lips,
dashing in and out of restaurants
where we order roast duck.

We'd stay up in our hotel
reading Keats.

And then it would snow and it's almost
Christmas in my mind.
Poetry is flooding the streets.

Making all dancing glass and ice.
Plush with purity which reflects
the store's mannequins and for a
moment stillness hangs on and we
embrace. Stopping in our cafe for a bowl
of cafe au lait which would smear
on his mustache and I wipe off with
the back of my hand. We talk
about the intensity of our vision.

He's not flimsy as an apparition;
presses me against him. I can smell
his hairy chest.

That love is opening pores and
love pours in. We met by phone
and we've completed the connection.

Christmas lights go on. Love's ornament
is served on a saucer, breakable and strange.

MORNING

pulls on rooftops,
handing them over to dawn,
pushing early blue
into yellow windows.
You wait
for coffee-water steam
to smooth your scoured throat
and glance back to the bed.
Hours of warming
are lost in minutes,
so you look to the coffee again.

Snow covers everything
like a blue skin.
The dog pushes
against the chain around his throat
and pulls
you to the Common.
His feet stamp crisp prints.
Yours, soft-shoed and sweeping,
make wild slashes.
The dog stops for a tree,
sniffs the roots
that worm down into dirt.

You push the dog away,
letting go the chain.
Blue toes push
out of your yellow sock.
You wait
for a curl of steam
to smooth your tightened throat
and glance around for the dog.
Hours of morning
are lost in minutes.
You look to the toes again.

QUEEN(S)

We weren't tired. We
looked at the black sky
and thought it was velvet,
wanted to try it on,
put our hand to its crush.
The dark window
reflected our red flannel self
and a clock applique.
The colors bled
in a greasy handprint.

The moon followed us
from window to window
into rooms of sleeping brothers.
We touched them
until they almost woke,
lifted an arm and let it
drop, opened their eyes
to see what they looked like,
watched them roll in their sockets.
The boys snored
and we cured them, we
pinched their noses.

The bed was a griddle, our blanket
sneezy wool. We lay,
both hands layered on our chest,
straight-legged, sweating,
eyes closed, mouth clamped,
still awake.

KWANZAA

1.

he laughs at the people falling down
rolling from the pressure of water hoses
turning up to Momma on the couch
to share television's joke

tears roll down like Texas sweat
as she leans in, rubbing her hands hard
his tiny frame is trembling now
she turns off the set, holding her child

Mother, Mother, let play a 45 of Marvin's
gave her son a bowl of vanilla fudge
even cartoons never carried laughter
after she explained the swirl of the world

2.

a woman in a burlap skirt arches her back
peeks over at her husband's chafed hands
so long and strong, full of cotton
sweat rolls down her face like tears

her man looks up suddenly, feeling her eyes
burning into him the way the sun can't
he motions her back to work, looking around
then flashes that smile he knows she loves

at night he grumbles quietly in a shack
cursing a world who would break up a family
his wife praises her God for giving him hands
big enough to hold every Ibo* tear she has left

*Ibo: African race renowned for their melancholy following capture;
some reportedly died of severe depression.

GUILT

The old tart with the wig askew and lipstick smattered loafed behind her crap desk and muttered about "the misery and grief" I'd caused with my wicked thievery, and all because I'd picked up a pair of shoes in Tesco and they fit me better than the ragged ripped-up plimsols with the flappy toes anyway. And my friend Vince had nodded the all-clear too soon, and she was upon me as I saw her. I was running like a cartoon mouse and getting nowhere, my new leather soles my downfall, as we crashed into a Cadbury's milk chocolate promotional display and thrashed awhile, while delighted shoppers shook their heads and tut-tutted and almost forgot for the moment the price of eggs, and shook their heads some more as I fought my attacker on the slick supermarket floor. And Vince had meanwhile vanished like mist into the gathering crowd, as I was bagged, subdued and removed of my new shoes, dragged into a shabby office and reminded of my very limited rights as a proven thief with no accomplice in this wretched deed. I slobbered apology, trailed long streams of snot from my nose to my sleeve and sobbed vigorously as I told her my tale of poverty and despair in dreadful slums with bad shoes. "You must pay!" said the crone "for the crime you've committed, now give me your *name* or it'll only get worse; Your name, your *name*!" And with trembling hands I wiped clean my face, looked at the floor, gave it to her straight:

Vince Fox,
14 Thatchwell Court.

My aid. My abettance. My very good friend.
She picked up the phone, dialed 999;
"I hope you feel guilty," she said. I did.

MEDDLESOME

Some boys twist the legs
off of spiders. The sunset,
as purple as a freshly
punched nose.

I smashed my fist into
the face of the boy, bringing forth
the spurt of blood and screams
and spit all down his shirt.

The sun went down.
The night was thick with moisture,
and soon we were bitten to death
by gnats, midges and the rest.

I went home and got whacked.
Spiders still drowned
in rain puddles.
He went home and had cake.

And stars
surrounded by stars
kept on flickering through
my locked bedroom window,

which is their job.

Two doves

on my palm:
white and black Motionless
await my blessing *But*
I am the wrong woman to ask!

They look up,
their necks arch
sipping the air
Quick eyes are tired

of navigation in the thin
sky Sighing the black one
lifts first And soon
they are two dots on the blue air

I look in your eyes, smile,
I drink the air and
my wings are no longer tired
Soon all disappears. The Earth
a dot on the blue



untitled
KIM BABON



Navel
HEIDI COPE



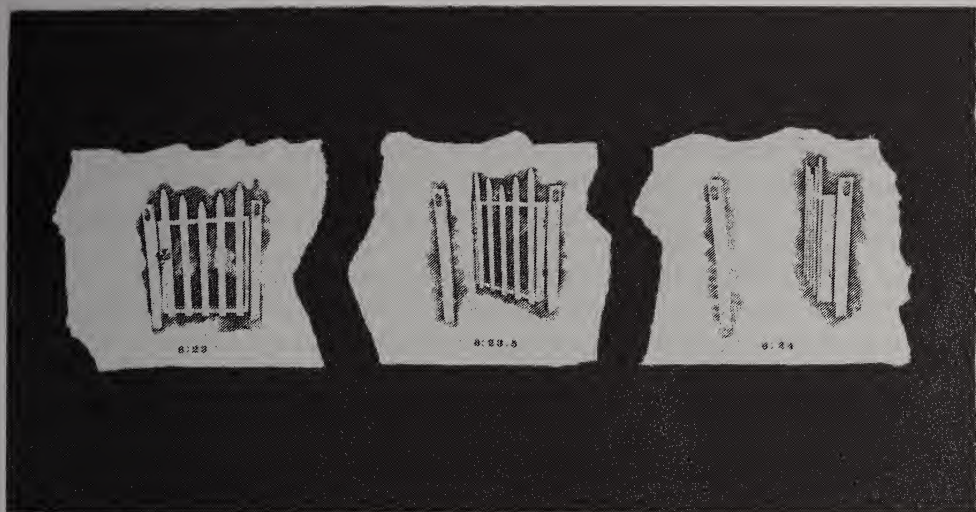
untitled
HEIDI COPE



With a little luck
DEBORAH L. DEMATTIA



Winter Storm
MARIA CASSON



The Gate
JACKIE FUCHS

SLUM OF THE SLUMS IN OLIVER TWIST

Although readers get a sense of the slums in mid-nineteenth century London throughout Dickens' Oliver Twist, we do not become fully enmeshed in the filth of such an environment until we near the novel's end. It may or may not have been intended, yet readers become acclimated to the crime and poverty shown in the less base neighborhoods which are described less vividly in the previous forty-nine chapters. Within this later and climactic episode, "The Pursuit and Escape" (in which Fagin's group of young thieves hide from the law, the murderous Sikes is discovered and literally frightened to death, and little Oliver Twist is rescued), Dickens uses a similar type of gradual progression, which also, interestingly enough, parallels with the narrative tension. Rather than plunging us within the heart of the slum without warning, the first sentence quickly lowers us to a part of the Thames "where the buildings on the banks are dirtiest and...[where] there exists the filthiest, the strangest, the most extraordinary of the many localities that are hidden in London, wholly unknown, even by name, to the great mass of its inhabitants" (442). Before we may arrive at such a place—with its vileness insisted upon before it is described—the author first leads us through the dingy outlying streets in the East End which are less deplorable than those later encountered in this wretched neighborhood of Jacob's Island.

Described within the second paragraph of this chapter's two page illustration is the labyrinth of squalid, fetid streets, inhabited by the poorest of the poor, which lie at the periphery of the most abominable section of London. The streets are "thronged by the roughest and poorest of waterside people" including "unemployed labourers of the lowest class, ballast heavers, coal-whippers,... ragged children, and the raff and refuse of the river" (442). As pitiable as this impression sounds, it appears that Dickens was engaged in a bit of romantic realism: the former category, the "lowest class," suggests thieves, beggars and charity people who have already been seen in the story; yet the latter, equivocal category depicts a group too sorrowful for the author to fully portray. The "raff and refuse" are probably those who Henry Mayhew describes as "mud-larks" in his social anthropological work, London Labor and the London Poor (209-218).

"Mud-larks" were river scavengers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who made their living from the scraps found in

the Thames at low tide. Of his recorded observations finished in 1852, Mayhew writes:

They may be seen of all ages, from mere childhood to positive decrepitude, crawling among the barges at the various wharfs along the river; it cannot be said that they are clad in rags for they are scarcely half covered by the tattered indescribable things that serve them for clothing; their bodies are grimed with the foul soil of the river, and their torn garments stiffened up like boards with dirt of every possible description. [209]

The mud-larks would attempt to find bits of coal or wood, which could be sold to the neighborhood's other poor inhabitants, as well as screws, rope and bones which could be exchanged for a price at a rag-shop. When a mud lark was fortunate enough to find an occasional tool, a trade could be made with seamen for bits of food. Obviously the larking way was hand-to-mouth living, so be they shirtless, or shoeless and bloody-toed, this destitute lot scavenged all year round to make the daily wages needed to feed themselves and oftentimes their entire families. As would be expected, many mud-larks supplemented their earnings with thieving, prostitution, or other "illicit" acts (for example, sweeping dust from empty coal barges), which also may have ensured being thrown into jail or the House of Corrections. By being caught and institutionalized, these "river-finders" could at least depend upon comforts such as a few morsels of food and temporary clothing (210-214). It is no wonder that Dickens opted to document these people in the vague and delicate expression, "the raff and refuse of the river;" he had worse sections yet to describe, and his readers may have lost interest or stamina by reading such a detailed account of a people whom many chose to ignore.

The labyrinthian slums described in this chapter, including the muddled sustenance of the waterside people already mentioned, were typical and consequential of the Victorian factory town (in which neighborhoods were cheaply built in haste to accommodate masses of exploited laborers). Each set of structures was more offensive than the last as the natural course was to squeeze new dwellings into "any open ground still left and packed the old ones tighter" (Chesney, 94). In the "Pursuit and Escape," Dickens shows us three levels of decline; prior to our arrival at Jacob's Island, he first escorts the reader through the second layer of the East End slum:

Arriving, at length, in streets more remote and less-frequented than those [already] passed, [the visitor] walks beneath tottering house-fronts projecting over the pavement, dismantled walls that seem to totter, ...chimneys half crushed, half hesitating to fall, windows guarded by rusty iron bars that time and dirt have almost eaten away, every imaginable sign of desolation and neglect. [442]

And still the conditions worsen upon Jacob's Island. Here, readers witness:

Crazy wooden galleries...with holes from which to look upon the slime beneath,...rooms so small, so filthy, so confined that the air would seem too tainted even for the dirt and squalor which they shelter; wooden chambers thrusting themselves out above the mud, and threatening to fall into it—as some have done; dirt-besmeared walls and decaying foundations; every repulsive lineament of poverty, every loathsome indication of filth, rot, and garbage" [443].

What we can extrapolate from this, besides coal dust, are conditions cited in Kellow Chesney's The Victorian Underworld: common verminous beds; licentiousness and rape* resultant of the bed sharing of communal living (not excluding children); lack of sanitary habits due to the scarcity of fresh, running water; and the stench and slop of privy buckets and cess pits which lay behind or between domiciles (97-100). What Dickens does in this description makes the reality of poverty surreal. Of course this is not a criticism, for had Dickens included the accounts of such survival means in this semi-romantic novel, readers may have opted to forgo the remaining two chapters (and his later novels).

There is little wonder how neighborhoods of such squeezed squalor could be breeding grounds for crime, yet, paradoxically, these streets were neglected by the law. Chesney notes that this type of densely packed neighborhood could not be controlled by constabularies. Not only did they fear the solidarity of the oppressed and angry masses, but they were more concerned with protecting the other classes from the likes of the slum dwellers, who often ventured westward for a wider variety of pockets to pick (92-

* The rape and licentiousness which Chesney and his middle class contemporaries refer to are not excluded to the poverty class, as they so intimate.

96).

Even with the free reign from the lack of policing, the lodgings on Jacob's Island could not have lured Fagin's boys (Toby Crackit, Tom Chitling, and Charley Bates) were it not for being connected with a serious crime, in this case the murder of the "surnameless" Nancy. The houses here

are broken open, and entered upon by those who have the courage; and there they live, and there they die. They must have powerful motives for a secret residence, or be reduced to a destitute condition indeed, who seek a refuge in Jacob's Island. [443]

Not even Kags—the most minor of characters in Oliver Twist who faces execution for re-entering town after deportation—is content with this hide-out in the slum of the slums. The Fagin-less gang would much prefer to be in the comfort of their own quaint slum, somewhere west of the island where the streets more readily intersect with the wider, wealthier ones.

Despite the fact that Dickens documents the location of Jacob's Island "beyond Dockhead in the Borough of Southwark" (442), the area which Chesney calls "the Venice of drains" (108; without implication of Italian charm), seems unrealistic without prior knowledge of the plight of the London poor. The area, factually named so due to the high tides of Folly Ditch which surrounded it (Hayward, 116), was probably more rancid than what Dickens has revealed; and knowing the slum existed only one mile from the propriety of the Houses of Parliament further adds a surreal dimension to the historical truth. The island and its vicinity, as decrepit as they were at the time of Oliver Twist, would continue standing, and sinking, for well over a decade (64).

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STAR TREK: YET ANOTHER GENERATION OF NEGATIVE IMAGES

One show which violates the rules of sensitivity toward positive images is the new version of the Star Trek^(R) series. Although dubbed "one of the most progressive shows on television" by many critics, Star Trek: The Next Generation has much to understand regarding positive African-American portrayals. Based well into the 24th century, the show emphasizes how far the human race has progressed in terms of technology, exploration and, most importantly, race relations. The viewer is deliberately led to believe that in the not so distant future, humans have finally overlooked skin color while commonly uniting with other intelligent life forms in the universe to form the United Federation of Planets. It is within the Federation where all peaceful creatures of the cosmos get together and, as Captain Picard of the Enterprise states, "seek out new life and new civilizations, [and] boldly go where no one has gone before."

It is this presumption of racial harmony and universal equality that highlights the problems with the show. Contrary to the messages sent by producers to viewers of Next Generation, African-Americans are not visible in significant numbers. In fact, the viewer is covertly led to believe that there are not many blacks in the 24th century, at least not working for the Federation. Black representation on the show continues to be largely portrayed by hideous monsters which become a menace to society, i.e., the Ferengi. In addition, the majority of citizens on the Klingon homeworld, a hostile planet, are extremely volatile and warlike. Their nature is significant because they are dark-skinned. The viewer is subliminally affected by making a connection between the grotesque brutish Klingons on the screen and any average African-American in their neighborhood. Other disturbing characteristics of the Klingons include short tempers, rebellion against law and order, and false pride obtained from the conquest and pillage of inferior worlds. These negative images add to an unrealistic fear and intolerance of African-Americans by non-minority Americans.

A closer examination of Next Generation characters reveals that, on the surface, these attributes may be considered honorable and perhaps noble by the strictest white American standards. In fact, what modern European (read "American") could argue the

validity of the Klingon's morals or ideologies? History has already shown that insurrection and greed fueled the curiosity of the old explorers, and inspired men like Julius Ceasar, Erick the Red, and Christopher Columbus to travel all over the world. This was devastating to the indigenous populations of the countries they opened for exploitation. The European explorers decimated, pillaged, and exploited both the people and the lands they infested. Nevertheless, in terms of the show, many of the Klingons are black. The implications are very clear: while whites have achieved passivity in their explorations, blacks have evolved into irrational war-mongers. This brings us to the ongoing debate about whether mass media serves as a reflection of life, or as an influence on attitudes and behaviors. One powerful message conveyed is that these Klingons eventually yield to the superiority of the Federation, mostly a white homo-sapien governing body, and fall into the rank and file with other absorbed civilizations.

When Next Generation episodes center around a predominantly black world, the writers conscientiously choose to depict the civilization as primitive. For example, in "Code of Honor", blacks are dressed in what is commonly thought of as "native" or "savage" attire; images of blacks in the old Tarzan series come to mind. They wear robes, elaborate headgear, sandals, and inadequate weaponry. They also reside in primitive abodes. This is in direct contrast to a comparable alien civilization which is predominantly white. On such a planet, the life forms tend to be more civilized, well mannered, less manipulative, and possess technologies comparable to those on the Enterprise. What is the underlying message? I am not suggesting that the show created these negative portrayals of blacks intentionally. The images, however, are there.

Any hint at normalcy in African-American representation on the show is scarce, from the rank and file, up through Star Fleet Command. The bottom line is that "normal" blacks are rarely represented in the future. When blacks are seen, they usually remain in support positions. For instance, there is a black female transporter operator on the Enterprise. She is not, however, featured on a continual basis, but is a fill-in because the show cast a white male (Miles O'Brien) as transporter chief. Featuring the woman transporter operator on a regular basis, even in a support position, would, if nothing else, create a sense of teamwork which represents a part of normal society. More importantly, seeing a minority working in the future enhances the richness of Next Generation by sending positive messages to the viewing audience. It is time that the writers of the show realize that allowing a black woman to operate technical

machinery gives African-Americans and women a positive role model. This acts as restitution, and benefits society by acknowledging blacks and women. Both groups can gain a sense of optimism about what their roles and contributions may be in the future, and can earn respect through equality. The show sells short any potentially good image by using O'Brien instead of the black woman.

In short, there is nothing wrong with following the Prime Directive. The writers of Next Generation have an obligation to show how characters are portrayed in the hierarchy of power. What is needed, however, is a fundamental change in the writers' attitudes about the characters. It is true that only a few people can have powerful positions on the show, but the writers could have minorities in more leading Starfleet positions. Only then will the show truly realize its responsibility to the African-American community, and America at large. At best, it would remove some of the negativity on the show.

Proponents of the show often disregard the negative depictions of African-Americans in Next Generation because characters like Geordi (LeVar Burton), Guinan (Whoopi Goldberg), and Worf (Michael Dorn) are indeed positive role models. It is true that these characters are played by black people, and are respected by their co-workers. In each case, however, they are represented as either alien, i.e. Guinan and Worf are not human; or as physically disabled, i.e. Geordi requires a special visor to see. In fact, the only vision of blacks in the future would be one of three character types: freaks of nature, aliens from hostile planets, or the physically challenged. What type of message does this send to the viewing audience? In terms of traditional cinema, the tokenism of black characters is a direct result of white males controlling the Hollywood film industry. Producers, directors, writers, etc., continually fend off the complaints of negative portrayals by arguing that the Hollywood establishment at least includes black characters in films and television. This is not sufficient. Having three token blacks on Next Generation only cheapens the program and reinforces negative images in the minds of the viewer. The writers try to compensate for the freakish natures of each of the aforementioned characters by giving them special abilities that allow them in some respect to transcend their "handicaps." The blacks remain tokens nonetheless.

On the other hand, these three actors do excellent work on the show, and in some ways serve as positive role models for black viewers. Even so, the stereotyping of the characters they portray is very damaging. Those who watch this show are subliminally

affected by the offensive and demeaning misrepresentation of blacks. **Star Trek: The Next Generation** is a truly unique show and influences our society. It is the responsibility of the industry to illustrate that the rights of black people must be advanced, through mainstream Hollywood as well as independent black cinema. The writers must also show more responsibility and tap into the visions, knowledge and strengths of the black race. Only then can society "go where no one has gone before."

GLOSSARY

These definitions are totally subjective, and are based on general knowledge gained by watching the series over several years.

The United Federation of Planets: Governing body consisting of several planetary civilizations. Headquartered on Earth with outposts throughout the galaxy. Also referred to as the Federation.

Ferengi: Alien race of thieves, liars, cheats, and pirates. They have exaggerated Afro-centric features, i.e. nose, complexion, and cranial structure.

Klingons: Alien race of warriors, mostly ill-tempered and very intolerant of outside cultures. Originally bitter enemies of the Federation. That soon changed, however, when the incompetence of greedy Klingons led to the destruction of their home planet. No longer able to fight a war with the Federation, they reconciled their differences and joined the Federation to preserve their race (see the movie *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*).

NCC-1701D, USS Enterprise: Flagship of the Federation, and a space exploration vessel. The Enterprise is a fully operational "city" with a crew of over 1000 men, women, and children. It was constructed as a galactic exploratory vessel and science station, but is also used for quasi-military purposes.

Star Fleet Command: Military committee of the Federation. This policing body of beings, mostly human, was assembled as a governing body sworn to protect the interests of the Federation throughout the galaxy.

Transporter: Most efficient means of short distance transportation in the 24th Century. Its principle involves the breakdown of one's molecules, transporting them in a beam, and reassembling them at another location. Hence the series' popular phrase, "Beam me up!"

Prime Directive: Constitution of the Federation. This document stipulates that any agents under the jurisdiction of Starfleet Command must abide by the doctrines governing proper behavior, ethics, and legalities of any civilization which the Federation encounters while exploring the galaxy.

WINTER VOYAGE

I can't understand why I still get a tight knot inside my gut every time I step aboard the boat. You'd think that after nine years of commercial fishing my body and mind would be used to life at sea. But no, the anxiety level still runs high, just as it did the day I made that first memorable twelve-day voyage in January of 1981.

I was eighteen years old when I got my first position on a New Bedford-based scallop boat. I was the youngest man of a ten member crew whose goal was to steam out to Georges Bank in search of the elusive deep sea scallop. I'd heard stories about how dangerous it could be to fish on a ninety-foot boat in the middle of winter, but I was at that stage in my life when I needed to test my manhood. I was at the point where hanging out with the tough guys in the neighborhood wasn't enough. I was ready for something different, challenging the sea one-on-one, and the more I thought about it the more excited I became.

Since it was my first trip, the skipper said that until we were at sea I should stay out of the way and watch how the men repaired the gear. Scallopers rake the ocean floor with two thirteen foot steel dredges. Connected to them are chain bags containing so-called "sweep chain" which scoop up the various wildlife and debris found on the ocean floor. As I observed the work being done by two deck hands, I couldn't help listening to their conversation. "They're giving ten and variable for today and tonight, but I guess all hell's supposed to break loose by tomorrow," said George, a big, burly Irishman with a red beard. "Kid, you're in for the ride of your life. If I was you, I'd think twice about shipping out." If he was trying to discourage me from making the trip, he was not succeeding. Besides, I thought he was exaggerating about how angry the ocean would get. I was determined to find out.

The captain shouted, "Throw the lines," and we were underway. As we passed through the dike and into Buzzards Bay, the men went down below into the "foc'sle" while I remained on deck to breath the ocean air and take in the changing surroundings. The sun was bright and the day was cold and clear. I could see for miles. My heart pounded as we approached the Elizabeth Islands and Vineyard Sound. We cruised past Gay Head, Woods Hole, the Nantucket Lighthouse, and finally the Round Shoal buoy. According to one of the men it was only nine hours to the fishing grounds from this bouy. I wasn't sure I could wait.

The open ocean was breathtaking. The boat's bow dipped and rose gently over the waves, spreading a light spray over the boat. It was serene and made me wonder about how it could suddenly become treacherous and life-threatening. I knew a student at New Bedford High whose father was lost with nine other crewmen in a storm at sea. He vowed to his mother never to set foot on a fishing boat, but I couldn't let his misfortune keep me from experiencing life at sea.

The foc'sle, located inside the bow of the boat, doubled as the galley and sleeping quarters. It was dark and musty, with a long table in the center, eight bunks, four on the port side and four on the starboard, an old diesel stove, a sink and an icebox. If the ocean didn't kill me, the diesel fumes would. I unrolled my sleeping bag, hopped into my bunk, and drifted to sleep.

I was awakened at midnight by someone yelling from the top of the ladder: "Next watch!" Hustling out of bed, I put on my clothes and boots, and went up on deck. The men from the mate's watch had already started fishing, and they were now hauling the gear in. The winches rumbled, and the rigging shook as the gear was pulled in. Once the dredges emerged from the water, they were brought aboard and dumped on deck. I got my first look at a scallop pile. Along with a huge mound of mud were scallops, fish, and lots of rocks. George tossed a bushel basket into my arms and told me to pick up the scallops, save the fish, and shovel the rocks overboard. He warned that I didn't have much time because the dredges came back every half hour. This was my job for the next ten days.

I worked hard that night; picked bushel after bushel of scallops, ripped and gutted about three hundred pounds of codfish, and cleared the deck of rocks and sand for the upcoming tows. The other men stood in the shucking house, shucking the scallops. During the night, the ocean became calm and the wind died out. The water looked like glass in the moonlight. It gave me an eerie feeling. Six a.m. finally arrived and Siggy, a Norwegian about forty years old, told me to go below, eat some breakfast, and turn in. I didn't argue because every bone in my body ached. I had to be back on deck by noon, and I had a strange feeling the weather was about to turn.

I woke up at 11 a.m. to the sounds of pots and pans rattling on their hooks, and the crashing of waves against the bow. I managed to climb out of my bunk, dress, and drink a cup of coffee. Old Joe, the cook, was cursing the sea as he tried to make a meal for the men coming off deck. I got out of his way and as I headed up the ladder, he put a solid hand on my shoulder. He didn't need to tell

me to be careful.

I couldn't believe what I saw when I came out of the forecastle. Four men in heavy rain gear were desperately picking up scallops and fish from the pile as the skipper tried to keep the boat in fair wind. Looking back to the stern, all I could see was a wall of water about twenty to twenty-five feet high. I wondered if I would be able to stand on deck, let alone work on it. I put on my rain gear, said a short prayer, and mentally prepared myself for what was to come.

The men on deck told me to stay out of the way of the fishing gear, and not to hang onto the wire which hauls the dredges aboard. Then they laughed and told me to have fun. For the next six hours, the kid who wanted to be a tough guy got pummeled by the sea. I chased scallops and fish as they were thrown over the deck by the waves constantly rushing over the rails of the boat. Once I bent over to pick up a fish, and looked up just in time to see a green wall of water coming towards me. I dashed into the shucking house as it washed overboard everything on deck. The guys laughed and told me to "get the fuck back out there."

Luckily, my watch ended then. I jumped back into my bunk without bothering to eat, and wondered if this was what was in store for the next nine days.

As it turned out, God and Mother Nature were on my side. Other than that one bad storm, the ocean remained relatively calm. I continued to pick scallops, gut fish, and shovel rocks for the remainder of the voyage. I also got to know the other men pretty well. They accepted me because I worked hard and wouldn't give in to their taunts. More importantly, I proved to myself that I could endure some of the roughest weather conditions this world has to offer. It was also a valuable learning experience. I finally learned to respect the ocean because, even though I lived through one intense storm, Mother Nature could easily take me the next time.

Why do I insist on going to sea if I still get that tight knot in my stomach? Usually I tell people it's for the money or to escape from life for awhile. In reality, it's the ongoing challenge between myself and the sea that has drawn me to the deck of a fishing boat for the past twelve years, and probably for many more to come.

MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL

If I were beautiful, I'd be rich, because only the poor are ugly. If I were beautiful, I'd have my pick of men who would not only be as attractive as myself, but would also have incredibly high-powered jobs that never seemed to get in the way of our relationship. If I were beautiful, I'd be white, even if I were black. If I were beautiful, I wouldn't be part of the pink collar ghetto most working women are stuck in. No, I'd be an executive in some glass tower in some big city, where I never got runs in my stockings before the big meeting with the boss. If I were beautiful, I'd wear designer outfits that made me look like a sex kitten and yet, surprisingly, wouldn't keep me from being taken seriously. If I were beautiful, I wouldn't be a feminist, because only unattractive man-haters are feminists. If I were beautiful, I would glide through life on a cloud of applause and accolades, because this is the beautiful woman's due in America. But you don't have to hate me because I'm beautiful. I'm not. Although I have been trying for as long as I can remember to attain that magazine ideal.

I figured out early in life that what the world wanted from me was a particular kind of body and a particular kind of face to go with it. The problem for me was that my face and body kept changing, which became confusing after awhile. You see, when I was a kid, this model Twiggy was all the rage. Do you remember her? (Uh-oh. I've given a clue to my age, a no-no for the beautiful woman who must always remain somewhere in her early twenties.) Well, she wasn't called Twiggy for nothing. She was a walking Q-tip. Looking back, I'd say she was somewhat anorexic, but we didn't have that word back then. She had no breasts, no hips—nothing that would define her as the stereotypical voluptuous female ideal. She could have passed for a teenaged boy, except for her face, which was made up until she resembled a Kabuki player: thick, mask-like foundation, tweezed, penciled-in eyebrows, eyes swathed in heavy black eyeliner, and fat false lashes attached to her top and bottom lids. And the finishing touch—white lipstick. If I think about it for a few moments, it seems rather an absurd look to aspire to, but I shouldn't laugh. I was supposed to look like that, so I wanted to look like that. At least for a while.

Then comes the confusing part. The Twiggy look wasn't the only ideal I was supposed to copy, the other was Barbie and totally different. Barbie's got big, cone shaped breasts, a nonexistent waist,

and really long, skinny legs. I wasn't sure which was the "right" woman to be. Luckily, I was only 10 at the time, so it was easy to opt for the Twiggy look because I didn't have any breasts yet. I wasn't nearly as skinny as she was, so I started to take dieting seriously. I didn't stop eating altogether, nor did I begin a cycle of binging and purging; but a food policewoman entered my consciousness and never left. (She is always vigilant, rewarding me with self-esteem when I eat "good" things—rice cakes, carrots, sugar-free Jello—and punishing me with guilt and feelings of inadequacy when I eat "bad" things—anything over 25 calories that tastes good. Consequently, I will diet till I die.)

So anyway, I was on my way to this Twiggy look, and then everything changed again. Suddenly, the "natural" look was in, along with being blonde, blue-eyed, and having breasts again. I was in big trouble. Even though I had entered puberty, I still didn't really have breasts, and I wasn't blonde or blue-eyed. I was frantic. How could I live up to this new ideal? Colored contact lenses weren't around then, so I had to ditch the blue eyes idea. As for the breasts, I did more isometric, chest building exercises than you could shake a fist at, but to no avail. Sadly, breasts are not composed of muscle, but of fat, and I was dealt that cruel hand by fate that parcels out plenty of fat cells below my waist, but almost none above. Alas, I would never develop breasts, so I developed a sense of humor (but I still would've preferred the breasts). Is it any wonder that this particular period in beauty history was hard for me? About the only thing I was able to incorporate was the natural look, which worked out well because my mother, along with the nuns at Saints Philip & James school, wouldn't allow me to wear much makeup.

The next stage in life came with the next ultimate beauty: Brooke Shields. Her fame was a double-edged sword. Brooke was a brunette with brown eyes, so that my hair and eyes were attractive again. On the other hand, she was six feet tall, and had eyebrows you could braid. Yet even with those eyebrows Brooke was stunning. So I stopped tweezing and waited for my own to grow back. They didn't. I'd been plucking them too long because of that damned Twiggy. All I had left was a straggly, patchy growth that told the world I wasn't nearly as good looking as Brooke. I went a little crazy then, and started rubbing ginseng into my eyebrows to try to stimulate the follicles. It didn't work. I was now down on two beauty counts: no breasts, no brows. At least God had created eyebrow pencils, and I used them for awhile, praying I wouldn't sweat too much and accidentally rub the back of my hand over them, thus creating a brown streak into my hairline.

The other important thing about Brooke besides her eyebrows, was her legs. The girl was six feet tall and had limbs that climbed up to her armpits. The media called her "coltish." Coltish? I remember when that meant gangly and awkward. Now it meant young, free spirited, gamine-like—adjectives which would never apply to a five-foot-five woman like me. I was average, which is about the worst thing you can be in the eyes of the fashion and cosmetic industries. I read recently about a growth hormone for kids who show signs of dwarfism. It is now being used by girls who want to grow really tall. I know this is a horrifying misuse of medical science, yet part of me thinks with longing about how, with a little of that hormone in pre-puberty, I could have become coltish too.

I don't remember exactly what the trend was after Brooke. It all blends together: big breasts, pert breasts, Cupid's-bow lips, bee-stung lips, bell bottoms, hot pants, the peasant look, blue eyeliner, colored mascaras, press-on nails, French manicures, the Jane Fonda workout, long hair, short hair, teased hair, bleached hair, permed hair. The list goes on forever. It seems pointless and silly, doesn't it? However, I still keep diligent track of what's "in" and what's "out." I wouldn't want to be a "GLAMOUR Don't" after all these years of keeping up with the trends.

You may be asking yourself how I try to attain those standards set by the beauty industry. I think the best approach is to take you through my average day so you can see for yourself how untiring I am where beauty maintenance is concerned. You'll agree that I'm only doing what any recent issue of any women's magazine is telling me to do to be a successful (i.e., beautiful) woman of the 90s.

First I must make a confession. COSMO says that it's best to do my exercise routines before my day begins, because then my internal engines will remain revved throughout the day. This would mean that I'd have to get up at 5:45 a.m. I wouldn't, however, wake up before 6:00 to have sex, let alone to sweat and grunt over something that doesn't give me any pleasure, although I wish I did. I've always hated those women who put in a full hour at the gym before they show up for work. I am preparing myself to be fit and fabulous, though. I own wrist and ankle weights, barbells, a pair of \$175 cross-training Reeboks, and two fitness tapes (Kathy Smith's Fat-Burning Workout and Tamilee Webb's Buns of Steel). I haven't used any of them yet, but if I keep spending money, eventually guilt and a desire for a return on my investment will make me pump some iron and "go for the burn."

I do get out of bed eventually, stumble into the bathroom, flush, and hop into the shower, where I spend over thirty-five minutes. First, I run warm water (as if I were going to take a bath) and just sit on the edge of the tub and hold each foot under the faucet while gently rubbing a pumice stone over those areas prone to callouses. (MADEMOISELLE says it's almost sandal time). After ten minutes, I'm ready for a shower. Working from top to bottom (at the insistence of VOGUE), I start with my hair—Vidal Sassoon shampoo and conditioner—and then I cleanse my face with a Clinique Facial Bar followed by Clinique Gentle Exfoliator which "de-flakes, de-ages *and* freshens." Next I switch to Dove, with one quarter cleansing cream to clean the rest of my body without drying my skin. Finally, I put on a special mitt covered in round rubber nodes, which I rub vigorously over my thighs and buttucks to break down that unsightly, dimpled cellulite which HARPERS BAZAAR has warned about.

Stepping out of the shower, I dry myself ever so lightly, and slather my body with Fit & Firm triple-action body treatment, which not only "firms, moisturizes and nourishes," but also helps reduce the spongy appearance of cellulite! \$9.50 for four ounces is expensive, but I'm sure it's worth it.

By this time, my hair is ready for Alberto VO5 styling mousse for volume and hold. I blow-dry it, spritz it, and roll it up in molecular steam rollers. Well, I would roll it up in molecular steam rollers if I had any. When I eventually buy them, my fine limp hair will finally have the masses of beautiful curls I've always dreamed of, seductively blowing in the wind behind me as I stroll down the street. Maybe I could get the same effect with a perm, but not any perm I've ever had.

Then it's time for breakfast, which usually consists of a bagel without butter, and some juice. I hate this breakfast, and would much prefer a stack of pancakes dripping in butter and maple syrup, but my diet policewoman hardly ever naps, so I force down the bagel.

Now I return to the bathroom to work on my face. I pop in contact lenses (to wear glasses for vision correction would be to proclaim myself unattractive), and then I apply Estee Lauder Skin Perfecting Lotion which makes my face "firmer, smoother ...perfect;" Princess Marcella Borghese's Spa Lift For Eyes, because mine need extra help; Physicians Formula Le Velvet Film Makeup to cover those "little imperfections;" Revlon Color Creme Shadow in Slated Grey; L'Oreal Lash Out Mascara in Black; Clinique's Gel Rouge; and finally Chanel's Creme Lipstick in Soft Red.

At the office, I don't really do much beauty work other than to sneak into the bathroom a couple times to spray my face with my portable Evian water mist. It rehydrates my skin, freshens my makeup, and counteracts the drying effects of office air. I still haven't figured out why it costs so much since it's only water, but SELF says all the stars use it, I should too.

After work, I usually go straight home to have a light, low-fat dinner before carefully removing my makeup and slathering my face in wrinkle-reducing night creams. It seems dull, but if I went out with people after work, I might be tempted to have alcohol and bad food, which would just ruin whatever progress I've made. Besides, with the money I spend buying expensive, brand-name beauty products and changing my wardrobe every six months because what I own is "out" and I need to buy what's "in," I don't have much money left to do anything or go anywhere. I don't let it bother me too much. Whenever I start thinking about eating that stack of pancakes or selling my unused barbells, I just whip open a recent issue of MIRABELLA and compare myself to the models. Then I immediately open a pack of rice cakes. Yum!

* * * * *

- Every year Americans spend about \$20 billion on cosmetics and \$33 billion on diet products and exercise.
- The American Society of Plastic & Reconstructive Surgery supports the claim made by Naomi Wolf (author of The Beauty Myth) that 87% of their patients are women.
- In a recent GLAMOUR magazine survey, 83% of respondents said there was too much pressure on women to improve their appearance, and yet 85% also believed beauty is power.
- More than 50% of American college women have eating disorders.
- Kevin Thompson, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at the University of South Florida in Tampa tested women free of any symptoms of eating disorders to find out how they judged the size of various body parts. More than 95% overestimated their body size by about one fourth.

OBSERVATIONS ON LIFE MADE BY A DEMON LORD, PART 12

Having never been subjected to an all-night Ingmar Bergman film festival, I cannot be expected to offer any real solutions to life's problems. However, I hope to offer some insight on humanity's role in an ever-changing society, in respect to our relationship with the major orders of flying critters, and if I can open even one person's eyes to the plight of homeless ferrets, then what I write here will have done something approximating uselessness.

Due to psychologists' insight into the pattern of thought processes, we can now feel secure in the knowledge that when some people say, "Welcome to McDonald's, can I help you," they really mean "My name is Angus and I have a really irritating facial tic." Therefore, we can no longer hide our true feelings when talking to others, so the only alternatives are to be completely honest all the time or to shut the fuck up. Some people find each of these choices equally disturbing, which results in psychoanalysts raking it in. Because these professional types are the ones who have started the cycle to begin with, it would seem that they have grasped the concept of free enterprise quite firmly.

This leads me to address the issue of deceitful words. Since time immemorial, people have used the art of speech to make another believe something to be erroneous, usually for personal gain. "You can fool all of the people some of the time, and some of the people most of the time, and a few people all of the time, and there's one or two people who'll believe anything you tell them, even if you giggle, but they live all the way out in Oregon and it really isn't worth the trip." (I think Abraham Lincoln said that.) This adage illustrates an important point: some people, no matter how much you may not believe this, aren't as stupid as you may think. Because some people tend to be selectively gullible. Politicians know this. They know people would rather vote for someone whom they know is bullshitting them rather than for someone who tells the truth. Candidate A says, "I will lower taxes." Candidate B says, "Once in the Oval Office, I will wear nothing but this shirt." Now then, which one, in our heart of hearts, do we know is most likely full of it? The first one. The second one could very well be telling the truth. However, his proclamation calls to mind a most uncomfortable image--that of a 60-year-old with his permanent-vertical-smile firmly

planted in the driver's seat. Ee-yew! The first is elected, and he not only raises taxes, but is caught watching Lorna, the Naked Amazonian with Large Floppy Breasts with a 13-year-old boy. Many will say they saw this coming, but they tend to be:

A) full of shit;

B) supporters of Candidate B; or

C) the person who rented the video to the first candidate.

Other examples of bullshitting tend to fall within the lines of appearances. A phrase such as "I look better when I comb stray hairs over my bald spot" is a perfect example. It is the result of a person's inability to be objective. This man has difficulty saying to himself, "I'm bald." So he must be told such things from someone who won't hurt his feelings. And the type of person who could make these comments to the first person can be found just about anywhere, for a nominal fee. These brutally frank types must first meet the following requirements:

1) They must realize that Freud was just a weird little guy who was obsessed with sex and liked to ask questions of this sort. As such most of his theories are a load of horse muffins.

2) They must know that all things are interconnected in some way, and that everything anyone does will have a profound effect on an event halfway around the world.

3) Their favorite Beatle must be Ringo.

Once these conditions are met, you've got yourself an adequate babysitter for your hamsters.

To conclude, I hope this has had a profound effect on your understanding of the nature of humanity and Disney cartoons. Next time, we shall discuss why Captain Crunch insists on spelling his first name "Cap'n."



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KIRK GAGNIER



untitled
JESSE PUTNAM



Ghost
JESSE PUTNAM



Boylston
JESSE PUTNAM



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TEAGUE QUINN

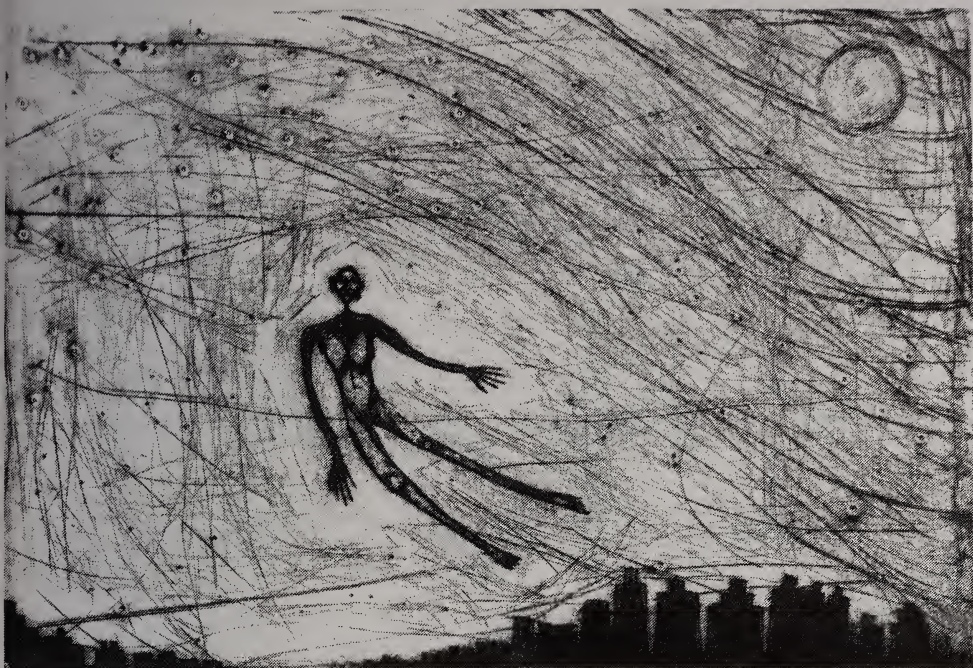


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JENNIE MCCRACKEN



untitled #2

JENNIE MCCRACKEN



untitled #5
JENNIE MCCRACKEN

FALLEN TIME

Old people drift through the parking lot in their Cadillacs. Old people come to the department store in search of cheap plastic goods and pistachio nuts in glass jars. Red ones.

Fat girls stand on the sidewalk eating powdered donuts. A kid holds his mother's shopping cart—stopping it from rolling in front of the liquor store. Orange necked bottles of soda stick out of paper bags.

My lips hurt from kissing. And I like to kiss. When I want to kiss. But not every day.

I hate the way my face is getting scraped from kissing. You should shave.

I curse you! I curse you!

I want you to go. As soon as you do—I curse myself.

The old people turn steering wheels to Cadillacs slowly. Drifting in my way.

I sight the tangent from where I'm standing (the yellow painted curb in front of the diner) to the automatic doors of the discount department store. A vast parking lot between me and it.

I'm going there why?

To get a clock battery. We woke up long after the hours when the day is cool. It is way past morning. My lover and I came to this expressway-side shopping-plaza diner-joint that serves pancakes all day. I wanted cranberry pancakes. I ordered apple and cinnamon because I forgot that they don't have cranberry. They usually take forever to put the food down so I left my lover in the booth to wait for our food. I went out to get the clock battery. I don't want to waste anymore time. Can't we ever get out of the house before noon?

Cadillacs are in my way. They navigate the white lanes on the tarmac. I slow my pace and quicken my steps to dodge them.

I am hurting from too much sex. And I like sex. But only when I want it.

I hate the way I'm getting sore from fucking.

I curse you! I curse you!
I will let you know it someday.

There is no time in his room. In my lover's house how could there be time?

Weak batteries move the hands to a clock that never shows the correct time. The second hand climbs. It clicks at each dot. It passes the nine then shakes. I watch it swiftly drop—clicking at each number, eight, seven. It settles back on the six where the battery can renew its battle against gravity.

I wonder what causes the hands to suddenly move faster than time, round and round. The face might read ten-thirty for three days. Yet, at any time I could walk in to the room to find that it is four. I've got to get a new battery. I want time back in my life again.

Sun blasts the tar lot. Ground glass shine and white line parking space paint glare. I sneeze. Waves of heat waste no time rising. Is it noon?

Newspaper lock boxes display the news. My coins drop into the green one and I pull a paper I will never read. At best, the covers of each section will be seen: METRO/REGION, LIVING/ARTS, SPORTS. Before chafed lips and sore sex I used to read the whole paper.

Air-conditioning spills out of the automatic doors. Damn store is huge. I am the only person like me in it, I can see that.

Dazed shoppers push plastic carriages into the valleys of women's clothes: printed dresses and silk-screened t-shirts paint themselves in flowery circles. No-name men's jeans are lined darkly in rows. Beyond the racks of clothes a range of pressed-sawdust synthetic-oak-finished furniture rises. My eyes find the words CAMERA & JEWELRY on a hanging placard. There I find batteries. My eyes pass over the selection. But the variant sizes and odd numeric codes of the energy cells discourage me. No salesman is behind the counter.

Candles burn in my lover's room with no time. At dusk their light grows bright. New wax sticks seem to grow faster than they melt. New candlesticks appear weekly. Great black iron stands hold four or five candles off the floor. A candelabra is strung from the ceiling over his banquet table. Votives multiply like rabbits on top of his glass tables and wooden chests.

For a brief moment I think can count time in the flickering light. By how fast the wax melts, or perhaps by the arrival of new candle holders. Days could be marked this way, weeks. But this realization fades. It is trailed by the sound of a jet coming in for a landing across the harbor. It sounds like the falling hands of a clock.

Immigrants and old people leave the department store. Carts full of plastic wares and marked down boxes of snack-foods wheel into the heat. This America they share in common.

It is not my America. I walk out with nothing.

I see there are Buicks, too. Navy blue hoods tick with the heat in the parking lot.

The air is liquid now—the tar melting the sky. Weeks of Summer now and this the first dose of hazy humidity. My lover is going to the beach. I have to go to work. I wish that the car dealership across the boulevard and the expressway behind it were gone. If they were gone there would be just shoreline—the marsh and sparkling bay. I have to work, I have no time to find where there is a real shore. How blind the tide must be to rise here again and again on a filled lot. A wind powers over the exhaust and I smell sea. I close my eyes and pretend the sound of traffic flow to be surf.

The diner is crowded. I am surprised to see another gay couple at the booth beyond my lover. My pancakes are already on the table. My lover's platter is almost empty except for two bright yellow pieces of french toast. He ate the eggs.

"Already?" I say.

"It came right out."

"That's unusual." I slice at my pancakes which look good except the hot chunks of apples I anticipated are cold and from a can.

"I'll just drink coffee, you eat." My lover shoved his plate to the center of the table.

"Your french toast is all yolks."

"I should have gotten my regular." Turkey and cranberry sandwich. My lover forks at my plate to try a bite. "Do you love me?" he asks.

I shove a corner cut of the four stack pile in my mouth while my mind roars inside: "Oh here it is! Rob me of a chance to say it

myself. I will say it. I like to say it. When I want to say it. Every time you ask me to say it I lose my chance."

"Yes." I say.

My lover smiles. "I'm going to the beach."

"I know." I pick at his french toast which is cold, "You told me last night." Imitation pancake syrup is hardening the egged bread further. "It's a good day for it. Humid."

"I'd bring the beach home for you if I could."

"Uh huh." The other gay couple passes. They acknowledge us with a nod. Do they ever see dawn? Will I ever see dawn again? I chew the french toast. "This is awful!" I put my napkin to my mouth.

It is after work and I lie on the floor in my lover's room. Maybe I can count time by the planes that fly overhead. Mondays the route is directly overhead. So at least I'll know my weeks.

I hear the window glass rattle and decide that the time between planes is eleven minutes.

Sometimes when we make love it takes three CDs to play through. The carousel plays five CDs continuously. How long does it take to play five CDs in a room full of burning candles?

The window pane rattles, I think. But the sound is not from that direction at all. It is the hands of the clock slipping down the notches. Ten-o'clock falling again.

I think about my job. It was good to see other people but I've decided to blame my job for not having enough time. Enough time to go to the beach. So, I should complain about it.

My lover will be home soon. I wait.

When I hear the key in the door I adjust my position on the floor so as not to appear to have been waiting. I hold a book open over my face. There's not enough light to read.

"I brought you home the beach." A wet heavy bag dangles victoriously in my lover's hand. "Like I said I would."

"You brought me home a bag of mud?"

"Wait! Close your eyes. I have to put it together."

Tap water runs in the kitchen and I hear the bread bag rattle. "I wished you were there today." He speaks from the kitchen.

"Me too. I still smell like work."

"It was gorgeous. And the water turned that renaissance green color you love. I just had to bring it home to you."

"You got good color." I watch his busy sun reddened shoulders through the kitchen doorway. He fills something with water in the kitchen sink.

"Look!" He holds a jar in the twilight. He had brought the beach back and reassembled it in a clear juice jar. "An aquarium!" In his jar there are two inches of fine white sand, made gray by the water poured over it, a single sand dollar rests on the sand bed. A tiny snail shell and half a clam shell lean casually against the glass. Three types of sea-weed float weightlessly inside my lover's ocean. A fat flimsy green helix suspended in the middle, lighter tangled yellow strings afloat on top and a heavier mass of pale green gunk that looks like frog's eggs gel near the bottom.

"It's beautiful," I say with breath.

Sometimes I can't breathe next to you. It's not your fault, it's simple mechanics. If your face is right next to mine either we're competing for the same air or I'm breathing your exhalations. Exhaust.

It's not that I don't like to cuddle. I like to cuddle. But not when I can't breathe.

I place the jar on the window sill to catch the fading evening daylight. The same light subsides over the real beach somewhere.

"Wait!" I say, "There are things alive in here!" Milky white creatures about the size of fingernail clippings dance in the jar.

"Little fishes?"

"Little sea weed things," My lover confirms for me.

"They're frantic!" They dart between the weeds to the water's surface then fall exhausted to the bottom before catapulting themselves upward again. "They're almost clear," I say, "They look like miniature albino lobsters or shrimp or something." Two pin-sized dots on one side of their head serve as pre-evolutionary eyes.

I am stunned by the height of the ceiling in this timeless place. I know I remarked about it once. The twenty feet stretching from floor to ceiling in my lover's room.

The lofty space stunned me the first time I walked through his door. Now it stuns me again. I had walked into his apartment with my own box of space—framed around my head as if taken from the mold of my little room and carried with me.

In that box space I have my own time. Ears count the revolutions of the circular fan churning the humidity uselessly. Forty churns a minute?

I wait for the seal to break—for the line between our spaces to erase. I wait for the density of my box to disperse into his. knowing only candles. Wanting not time.

Cadillacs lie in junk yards. Buicks too. All of the plastic they hauled. Do old people need to buy plastic? Do they need to buy anything at all? Aren't they going to die someday? But Cadillacs in the parking lot move way too slow to kill me.

"These move so fast." I study the jar.

"They're swimming."

"No. They can't breathe. This is fresh water. They're suffocating." One by one the seaweed animals fail to return from the sand bed. The few survivors flail themselves with a more intense vigor than before. "Look at them! How long do you think they can live like this? Without air?" I ask my lover who is at my shoulder watching. He is hot from the sun.

"What do they feel?" He asks me.

Wildly the survivors clamor to the top of the jar as if to attempt life in another element, air. Suddenly they stop, their curved backs arch stiffly, the final creatures have fallen to the bottom of my lover's ocean.

"Smothered," I ping the glass with my finger but the water is lifeless.

"Let's have sex." My lover takes my hand. The jar remains on the window sill. The moon rises to illuminate the clearness of the water. Three shades of a renaissance green it turns. As gorgeous a gift as my lover intends. He loves me.

NOTHING LEFT

She did not have any men. Not one. Not ever. Enough of them had had her, but she had not had any of them. And there wasn't much of her left to have enough. What she thought instead was that there was not much of her left to take. So she could take her chances now and it wouldn't matter. It wouldn't hurt and it couldn't feel any worse or any more painful than all the other times pieces of her had been taken away. It couldn't hurt as much as the first time.

She let him take her, a piece at a time. She wanted him to take her. She wanted him to take her so that he would eventually give something. After all, she thought, if someone takes enough they eventually give something, don't they? Maybe even someday when he realized how much he loved her, he'd give back that ring he wears on his left hand. And that, she would take.

She was on his neck now. Sometimes she thought that was the place she found the most pleasure. Her lips slow and easy on his soft warm flesh. She lingered there awhile; until she got carried away. Her mouth open wide and now hard on his neck. This was nearly her moment of ecstasy, she knew in just seconds she could absorb the flesh of his skin into her mouth. She loved his neck. He knew too. He pulled his neck away and pushed her head down toward the center of him. She resisted with some pressure, so he pushed harder and she gave in, thinking of what it would be like, to just once feel the flesh of his neck in her possession.

She met him at the warehouse. It was always cold there. She didn't bother to take off all her clothes anymore. He had always left his socks on. He cajoled her in a soft and sensuous voice. She tried to listen only to the sound and not the words. The sound was hypnotizing like his first touch. Even now as he reached out and slid his hand under her hair and around her neck; she felt hypnotized. The first touch of the night. He held her to him tightly for only a moment it seemed. He pushed her hand to his zipper. She followed through with his motion as he pulled her shirt loose from her jeans. She knew this part of the routine well. She just wasn't sure what he might suggest as something NEW tonight. She could tell already this would be one of the times he would SUGGEST something new to try. She felt she had tried enough already. She felt she had tried too much already. But she also knew he could convince her to try it, whatever it was. After all, the more she did what he wanted her to do; the more he would love her.

She ran the cold water over her wrists into the dusty sink. She rubbed her wrists gently. The marks were very faint. They should disappear before morning. She forced her head back and faced her own image in the mirror. Her skin was white through the makeup, or what was left of it. Her eyes more grey than blue right now. She soaked her face in the cold running water. His voice intruded from the next room. He asked if she was alright. She said she was fine. He stood in the other room waiting. He tapped his pant leg with the hand that was not holding her jacket. As she walked toward him, he extended the coat to her with one hand and turned and shut out the lights with the other.

He kissed her closed mouth, quickly, and walked away. She watched his back move toward the door. The safety lights might have been candles. She wanted him. Not like she had just had him but the way she knew he could be.

She convinced him to come to her apartment. He had not been there since they first met three years ago. She had no idea what he would try tonight, and she didn't care, because tonight she had a piece of him. She had him where she wanted. She felt stronger, more aggressive. She forgot about the bruises. She wanted him her way. He liked this side of her, at least for a little while, but that's all it ever lasted anyway, was a little while. As she would say, she fucked his brains out and kept going. Nothing kinky. At least not until he took over, but she was far gone by then. She just kept going.

He got up and went to the bathroom. She heard the water running, and she knew he was washing her off of him. She lay on the bed and listened. She listened to him brush his teeth. Brush and spit, brush and spit, brush and spit. She knew the rhythm well. With each spit her skin grew tighter. She wiped his spit from her face, only it wasn't his spit this time; it was her own tears. They felt so much like spit. She heard the harsh gargle from down deep in his throat; she could almost smell the overpowering peppermint liquid. He was going to make damn sure there was none of her left. She wasn't going to tell him that he had already made sure of that.

LIGHTNING

"Mary! Mary, do we have a sheet of plastic or something?"

"What for?" My mother's voice was cautious, the tone she used when she wasn't sure if it would be easier to help him or to talk him out of it.

"I need a sheet of plastic, or a rain coat." He was drunk, impatient, tapping a bottle cap on the counter.

"What about your rain coat?"

"I left it at work."

"A garbage bag?"

"No! I need to wear it, dammit!"

"Well, then, the only thing I can think of is this," and she pulled my poncho out of the closet.

"It'll do." He put it on. It was much too small and made him look clownish, his arms bulging out of the sleeves and the pink fabric only barely reaching his hips.

But when he brought an axe up out of the cellar, he didn't look funny anymore.

"What are you doing, Harry?" Her voice was still cautious, but there was alarm in it, too.

"I'm gonna' kill the chickens."

I was ten that summer. It was a hot day in July, not long after my birthday. I remember the stillness of the air, so thick, laying so heavily over everything that nothing stirred. Heat lightning flashed in the distance, and the world barely breathed.

We had raised those twenty roosters from chicks. They weren't pets, but every day I'd help my mother feed them and change their water. I'd sit for hours watching them flap their brown and white wings, their desperate attempts to fly out of the pen. But their wings were clipped.

One in particular—I had named him Orville in my mind—struggled more than the others to get out. He would flap and flutter on and on, long past the time the other roosters had stopped flapping and started pecking at the hard yellow corn strewn on the ground, long past the time when the rest had settled in for the night. Orville, with his almost golden wings, would flap and rise a few inches in the air, hold it for a few seconds, then fall to the ground, exhausted. I always wondered what made him try so hard.

I thought about running out and opening the cage that morning—about setting them free. But I knew my father would be

furious, and I didn't dare.

My mother spent a while trying to distract him. She said it wasn't that she minded him doing it, it was just that it was too damn hot to gut and pluck twenty chickens.

He was determined, though, and he marched out back, axe in hand, my brother and sister trailing behind.

I ran upstairs, grabbed my pillow and buried myself under the bed. But I could still hear the squawking and ruckus as they caught each one, the last puzzled drawn out cluck just before the thump of the axe on the tree stump. Then the shouts and laughter from my brother and sister as, they later told me, the chickens ran around the yard looking like they were still alive, still trying to escape. Except that their heads were missing and blood gushed from their gaping necks.

He killed them all, and my mother cleaned and froze them. Eventually, we ate them. Once or twice I cried so hard that my father got angry enough to send me away from the table.

Still, I went on. Playing in the woods and by the pond, climbing trees, staying out until it was so dark that the light in the kitchen window offered the only path home. Soon school started and I was caught up in the excitement of new friends, new teachers, new clothes.

Then, one day in late September, it rained. Thunder and lightning. I went to the hall closet, pulled out my rain poncho and put it on.

My mother came running. Had I hurt myself? Cut off a finger or toe?

She took my coat into the bathroom. "Cold water," she told me. "Never warm." It took her more than twenty minutes, and when she was through the streaks were gone; there were only dark, wet blotches on the soft pink material. "Cold water can wash away anything," my mother said.

"Like a miracle, you mean?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, "the only one that counts."

OVER-KILL

Natalie Tyler was the biggest mistake of our father's life. A middle-aged anorexic with psychotic tendencies, she lived on bad romance novels and laxatives. Every summer we were forced to suffer her company, since Dad got us June to August. We'd all pack into the huge olive Caddy, smothered by two tons of Nastily's plastic-encased Jackie O. dresses and some pungent scent she called 'glaahmorous', and head off to the seaside. Occasionally there would be a break in the monotony of the four hour drive; a blurry peek through the back window at the remains of a car crash piled jagged at the shoulder of the highway, or maybe a surprise stop at one of the local trading posts with five dollars each to spend. Once, the Otter, hiding behind some darling mint green number, amused us by solemnly liberating, one by one, all of Nastily's wigs from their round cardboard boxes. She lifted each from its bed of creased tissue paper and placed it dramatically over her own beautiful, light red hair. Seeing our darling little sister grinning out from under the dry, false scalps was nearly more than we could handle and Bambi and I had to pinch each other to stifle our laughter. If Dad saw anything in the rearview he never said a word. Anyway, once we arrived at Mosquito Haven, Nasty would fling open the car door, clutch her white wicker, box-shaped purse in her spiky little fists, and disappear into the cabin awaiting the delivery of her baggage. For six weeks straight she'd lounge around the pool, all eighty-five pounds of her wrapped in the latest Lagerfeld swimwear, periodically adjusting the pink chiffon scarf that wound around her head and knotted itself in a little pink glob at the center of her stringy throat. Some days she would force Dad to sit there with her, on call for tanning lotion application or chaise adjusting. Other days she demanded solitude and Dad would take us canoeing or show us how to dig for clams. Inevitably, one of us would lose a sneaker to the sucking low tide mud and would have to be carried back up the rocky beach, muddy to the knees and one foot bloody from broken clam shells. We would round the corner to the fenced-in pool and catch glimpses through the fig trees of our stepmother nibbling the corners of her book's cover and absentmindedly digging at her reddened nostrils with twisted bits of kleenex and then the Afrin bottle. At dinnertime she'd point out that not one of us had complimented her all day and she was shocked to see what charmless little ladies we were. Bambi, dusky eyes studying the glint of

the flatware, would whisper delicately, "Your hair looks really natural today." A choking sound would pop through Natalie's sharply penciled lips and then she'd hiss Dad's way. His eyes would glaze and, as his knuckles whitened around his linen dinner napkin, he would tell her she glistened in the sun like a wild capybara. This being enough to send her into paroxysms of delight, she'd coo a little, extend five raw, bitten nails toward his mouth for a kiss, and then thankfully shut up.

This summer Dad fixed it up with some friends to take a day trip together on their sailing boat. We were going to tour the local islands and Otter would be free to snap away at all the damn herons her camera could hold. The three of us, having become darkly suspicious of Natalie's cooking methods, claimed strange and unpredictable allergies, and packed our own lunch. We stuffed a loop-handled basket with peaches and peanut butter sandwiches and little cans of tomato juice and other things we liked. Bambi surprised us with a hidden stash of maple candy she'd saved and wrapped up in bright green cellophane paper. Dad, magnificent to us in his faded madras button-down from two father's days ago, pretended to eat and enjoy the fantastic, lumpy pates and tarts his wife served from the depths of her designer 'safari' bag; but we watched with smug relief as he quietly fed them all overboard, in a long crummy stream, to whatever aquatic creatures would have them.

A stalwart figure at the wheel, Mrs. Haley, who steered the boat with focused precision through the rock-infested waters, now and then checking the depth sounder or looking for buoy markings on the chart by her elbow, seemed to forget anyone was on board with her. She nearly flew over the wheel when her husband explosively launched into an impassioned lecture on the importance of thallophytic plants to the natural balance of Maine's green forestlands. By one o'clock we were sunburned, seasick, and ready to scrape the lichens off the next rock we saw just to spite Hal Haley.

Finally we came to a wild, craggy island, one that we could all agree looked worthy of exploration. The *Up and Away* was anchored with a loud group effort and many stubbed toes and fingertips pinched in the chain links. We heaved ourselves overboard into the dinghy, which rocked under us in a quiet, salty protest. Dad grabbed the splintering, gray oars which rested in the murky water at the bottom of the boat, and proceeded to row us in. Hal and Noni bickered quietly at our backs, on the last seat, about Hal's bald spot and how to protect it from ultraviolet rays. Noni kept thrusting a crumpled fishing hat at her husband, poking it into

his shoulder or chest, and Hal would push it back to her with a swing of his elbow. His hands were full with a small plastic bottle, its cap, and most of its contents. He grunted every time he rejected the hat and kept dabbing away with the thick white cream, dappling his head, his neck, and Noni's already freckled legs. Natalie, perched on her seat next to Dad, flared open a parasol she had unbelievably packed along, and proceeded to lean back against the coiled bow line, trailing her hand in the water and giggling with her head tipped back. From where the three of us were sitting, practically on top of one another, nothing seemed so damned hilarious, just that stringy throat stretched out under the bright Maine sun like a bleached elastic band.

We beached the dinghy, tied windbreakers around our waists, and marched through the sprawling catbrier beds up into the heart of the island. Soon the trees were around us, and in their shadows even Natalie fell silent. For a while there was only the soft thumping of Otter's camera as it swung from its strap around her neck, and bounced off her left thigh, her right thigh. The ground beneath us was damp, warmly absorbing our footfalls and smelling of puffballs, mosses, and other mysterious growing things. Every few feet there'd be a bubbling of toads, and each time the tiny, amphibious leaps rustled the ground cover, my stepmother's pink-swaddled head twitched briefly off its narrow axis. Mesmerized, I took in the visual rhythm of the procession playing immediately before me; the easy swinging of the camera, the spontaneous bursting of coldblooded toads through the curling, fallen leaves, and the sharp, insane jerking of my father's wife's head. Twenty feet ahead, on our shaded, narrow path, Dad, Noni, and Hal were visible to me in pieces. Their steps were steady, plodding, as they walked on unaware of the performance behind them, breaking their adult strides only to peel a stray branch from their path, or to casually swipe at cobwebs.

Our group slowly separated, filtering through the dark trunks in a widening fan. Noni and Dad branched to the left seeking traces of Indian habitation. Knock-kneed, Natalie trotted after them, throwing her hands all around her and squawking nasally about greenheads and deerflies. Hal ambled straight on, mesmerized by plant life, touching leaves and fungal growths tenderly and noting decay patterns in a little, spiral notebook he produced from a hip pocket. We three went right, walking shoulder to shoulder but not yet talking. We discovered together a pale lady slipper growing soft at the base of a seedling pine and we stooped to clear away the weeds that surrounded its slender, pliant stem. Our knees were

patched by the moist soil that clung to us in dark ellipses, wrinkling as we moved around the plant and tracing the scrapes we'd received from the wild catbrier teeth with fine black lines. We pulled slowly at the weeds, feeling further and further down each elongating strand as it was lifted from the earth, in case the villainous roots had already tangled with the orchid's. It was too dark for a picture.

Later, in a small, open field that rippled with high yellow grass and pointed out to sea in a bare, sharp cliff, our party reunited. We took seats on different parts of the rocky wall and watched the swooping antics of two black-winged hawks. There ensued some debate over the purpose of this energetic avian exhibition and whether the fierce looking birds might be engaged in some form of ritual love or war dance. A sudden northeaster lifted the spirited hawks up, far over our heads, and we watched as they parachuted great wings across the sky and then disappeared amid a cluster of pines. The sea below rolled lushly up against, and then finally over, the rocks that studded the beach, sliding easily over their seaweed-draped fronts. Then the surge receded, and the waves dripped back from their exultant, frothy whiteness to a cold and sombre green. Inspired by Nature's vigor, Dad climbed to a jagged peak and, brandishing a large, forked tree branch, stood over the sea bellowing lines from *Lepanto* which echoed to the inlets of neighboring islands:

"Strong gongs groaning as the guns boom far/ (Don John of Austria is going to the war);/ Stiff flags straining in the night blasts cold/ In the gloom black-purple, in the glint old gold;/ Torchlight crimson on the copper kettledrums,/ Then the tuckets, then the trumpets, then/ the cannon, and he comes."

Bambi and I were beside him in a flash, holding out our own gleaming bayonets and screaming the few words we knew, our adolescent shrieks swallowed by his deep, booming, growl. Otter marched around us and finished her roll of film on our noble last stand, to which Hal and Noni cheered and played our fanfare. Then, right between tuckets and trumpets, the fourth time round, Natalie forced our exuberant tribute to Chesterton to an early close by emitting a grotesque, bloodcurdling scream and toppling backwards off her rocky perch. She disappeared from sight, except for one faux leather slingback pump which was left hooked to the branches of a juniper bush growing stubbornly from the cliff face. We ran to the gravelly edge, peered down over the steely promontory and found Natalie landed, shoeless, on a narrow shelf about seven feet down.

Her bare toes were spread wide apart and they crookedly wrapped themselves around the little, loose pebbles scattered about the ledge. Her face was horrifyingly pale and a brilliant stream of blood trickled through her lashes when she looked up to us. Her scarf was decorated with what looked like awkward, red carnations, but were later discovered to be the bloody result of two deep gashes at her temple. She wailed loudly and the contents of her purse sprinkled the ground around her in a crazy pharmaceutical display. There were packets and packets of pre-wrapped, pre-moistened towellettes, at least six tinfoil sheets of lavender laxative tablets, reams of facial tissue, and a brownish prescription bottle with a child-proof cap. She looked a little dizzy but kept right on whining to Dad in shrill, impatient bursts, to come get her. The Haleys zipped, as much as they could zip, to the boat, to get a decent length of rope. Dad sent us back into the cover of the woods to find downed tree limbs with which to reach her, and he stayed by the cliff's edge, trying vainly to calm his bloody, hysterical, stranded wife.

My sisters and I returned before the Haleys, but had not had great success, finding only short pieces of mostly rotted wood. We stepped up beside our father who without turning his head, muttered, "She's dropped." Sure enough, many feet below, sprawled out over the sea-bathed rocks like a cataleptic spider, was Natalie. Her other shoe rested, for a few moments, by her broken wrist, where it had been spat up by the sea, and then was dragged right over her, caught in a twisting wave.

We watched her for a good five minutes, and she never did move, so we clambered back down into the grass and started, hand in hand, toward the boat and Hal and Noni. I looked up at my father who squeezed my hand, and smiled weakly at me. We continued in silence. The Haleys came puffing over the island to meet us, offering great loops of rope and then falling dumb, appalled by our gruesome news. They bestowed upon us stammered condolences and turned to lead us back to the boat where they would radio the authorities. A loud crack of distant thunder hurried our steps and great, gloomy clouds rolled the sun out of the sky above us while a cool, susurrus wind carried the first drops of rain over the island.

LOCKED OUT OF HIS MIND

"It's your turn"

"Go ask me arse—I walked him home the other night"

"Yeah and you nearly killed him, poor man nearly cracked his head open on the front step when left in your care. Go redeem yourself and walk him home this night."

"You're full of shite"

And there you have the brothers, my brothers, Johnny and Charlo. Marvelous, isn't it, they spend their time before roaring turfs only to rise to add more to the flame. Even this action they carry out with the moans of sixty year old men. I knit while they amuse each other with talking, no, no, I tell a lie; they argue, they argue just for the exercise of it.

There's Johnny. Deep agonized lines around the faraway green eyes, so green they're brown. And his red swollen nose—his skin is stretched so much that his pores have become visible holes on the canvas of his face. Holes left from working the building sites in London and drinking like a man dying of thirst. Dying, so he was. Came home for the funeral, won't go back now. Says he'll stay to mind the Da. The blind leading the blind... ah but he has a good heart.

I look to Charlo. His hands, the joints are swollen and plum red. Seven years of carrying bread boards has left it's mark. Charlo, always the hard old worker. Always willing to carry in endless buckets of fuel when the Ma needed to dry and air the clothes. Sure even when Da was on the Dole and there wasn't a piece of coal, bricket wood, turf, anything, to be got in the house, Charlo still fetched some fuel for the fire. Himself and his pal, Dicey, robbed the coal from the poshers in Glasnevin. The Ma never knew a thing. And as to the Da, well he just clapped Charlo on the back and said, "Good lad, we'll make a man of you yet."

I raise myself from my mother's old chair—it's still soft, even now. An affected sigh comes from my throat and before the hearth, "Jesus, you couldn't organize a piss-up in brewery."

"No, it's grand, I'll go." Charlo rises and throws a disdainful look towards Johnny. He makes for the door—the same door with the broken handle that he's been meaning to fix for the last three months.

"Ah, sit down there, no seriously, it'll do me good to get a

walk, it'll clear the cobwebs outta me head."

"Well if you're sure," he looks puzzled.

"And why wouldn't I be." I turn from my brothers and leave them to argue some more.

My mother's shawl. I place the faded red material under my nose. I smell her, milk and lavender. I can almost feel her hand smooth my hair and hear her hum "Sally Gardens." I smile a memory. She was a strong woman.

I set off to retrieve my father from the pub. It's way past closing time at Doyles and they've no doubt shown my father the door already. I dash across Glenhill Grove and take the Widows Lane to the Old Belfast Road. I arrive in the Village and face the green, curling and crinkled paint on the front door into Doyles with barely a breath left in my body.

A push on the door and the smell of cigarettes and pipe tobacco wafts up my nose. The noise of glasses clinking and running water rises from behind the bar. Clean-up time. The place is empty except for Pat the barman, and Paulie Byrene who is most likely giving tips to Pat for tomorrow's 3:30 at Ascot. Paulie tells me I've just missed my Da by five minutes. I check the back booths nonetheless, but Paulie is telling a truth and I bid him "Good night and safe home to the wife."

There's not a soul to be seen on the village road. Oh Jesus I hope he hasn't fallen down in some ditch. One good thing: if he's asleep outdoors there's bound to be enough whiskey in his body to keep the cold out of his bones. Home. Maybe I'll meet him along the way. I make my way back. The road echoes loneliness and I wrap the shawl closer to my face. I'll go home by way of the church, the angels on the corner of its walls will keep me company. I cross the road and already the side of the stone grotto is in sight.

The wind whistles in my ears along with, to my amazement, the sound of loud, gruff, singing. It's emanating from the grotto. It's me Da.

"Hail Mary
full of grace
laugh at me
spit in me face."

I run. The urgency of my feet bangs in my head. Dear God, please don't let him wake up the parish priest. All we need is Father Moron knocking on the front door. I stand at the entrance to the grotto, hands on my cheeks and heart in my shoes. "Da, for the love of God, what are you doing?" His body is slumped on the statue of the Virgin Mary, his left cheek against her sheep white feet. His face is

smushed up and distorted, mouth agape, and saliva leaks from his tongue and onto her holy still feet. His eyes struggle open.

"Ah, it's you Lorraine," he sways to an upright position, "do you remember the time, the time they said this statue was walking?" His face is quizzical, almost stern as he awaits my reply.

"Aye I do." I look at the Virgin's face. I hope she doesn't take offence to my father.

"Walking," he laughs, "I don't know about walking but I've gone dancing with her on many a night." He puts his arms out to dance and falls against my arm.

"Come on Da," I take his arm and place it on mine for support. "Come, walk me home." He sways by my side but I'm encouraged by his placing his left foot in front of his right. Thank God, we're walking out of the church yard. A guilty glance to the rectory and I check the place for lights. All is dark—I'll tell you I'll be offering up prayers of thanks to St. Jude for this one.

By the time we reach the Old Belfast Road my father is roaring the chorus of "The Wild Rover." God help him, but he can't remember the verses so he mumbles a few and then belts out the chorus again. There's no houses around, well except Bill Dalton's and he's bound to be as drunk as my father, so I let him sing on. As we turn into the Widow's Lane, my father turns and looks at my face; he seems surprised at my presence—perhaps he doesn't realize I've been supporting him on his way home.

"Ah Lorraine," he muses, "there you are again. I'm meeting you a lot this night."

"Aye Da." I look to my arm and will it strength to get us home. The muscles in my upper arm and the back of my neck ache from supporting his body.

"Lorraine," my father straightens up his back and places his face very close to mine, I can smell traces of Guinness and Jameson's falling from his lips. I close my eyes and his breath warms my nose. The whiskey smell calls water to my eyes. "Lorraine, I've been meaning to tell you," he looks at my buttons, "I love you." His eyes look off to some distant place over my shoulder. "Your Ma, God rest her, told me that was my problem—never said what I was feeling." He so close now I can almost feel him against my cheek. His voice becomes a whisper. "Look I know I'm drunk now, so it doesn't mean as much, but remind me tomorrow and I'll tell you again."

I place his hand in mine. "I will Da, now let's head home." Our steps begin again. His rough big hand, I clasp his hand—there's welts on his palm. I gently rub the coarse lumps and ponder his age and things he has seen. How much do I know about the man I call Da?

We arrive at the Grove to see Johnny bending over the wall, peering down our way and Charlo walking towards us with an expression of relief decorating his face.

"Ah Jesus," he takes my father's arm, "is he bad? Is he locked out of his mind?"

"No son he's just locked in it," my father smiles the smile of a man who just won a race. We pilot him into the too small frame of the front door. It takes the three of us to carry him up the stairs.

"Mind his head doesn't hit the banisters."

"Jesus he's killing me back."

"Shut up moaning and move."

We manage to get him into his bedroom. In our attempt to lay him down gently we all fall in a heap on his bed. My father moans and slumps forward. "Ah, we're having a party now, and the lads here too." He looks to my brothers who are now both examining the boards of the floor with their embarrassed eyes. The wooden boards seem to weep with the weight of my brothers' shuffling feet. My Da looks from the brown old army blankets and onto us. "I loves ye all—and I'll tell you that when I'm straight too." I can already hear Charlo and Johnny making for the door.

My Da closes his eyes. "Goodnight now Lorraine."

His nostrils contain droplets of clear mucus—maybe he's getting a cold. Tomorrow I'll give him some of Mrs. Riley's tea. "Goodnight Da. I'll see you in the morning."

SERENDIPITY

I'm walking down a dusty, empty dirt road in Greece. The road is the color of stewed sunflowers and the surrounding countryside is sparse—the vegetation is lying low. My hiking boots are getting heavy and cause me to walk really slowly, my hips just sort of undulating. The sunlight oozes everywhere and drips into my soul. My legs look as if I've walked across Europe, lean and tanned and slippery; yet my backpack is a bulging, swollen heap of absolute essentials. My body feels fluid, my joints are only connected with chewing gum and my skin wants a divorce. A fat black bird spins in the air above my head and almost stops to discuss pyrotechnics, but decides against it, opting instead to twitter what distinctly sounds like a Hellenic fishing tune.

"If I were to dive into a chrysanthemum, what would I find?" I ask the bird. He laughs and turns fuchsia.

There is absolute silence. Not a tickle of wind, a caress of a breeze, nothing. The sky is devoid of anything resembling a cloud and is so proud of its periwinkle, positive, pervasive texture. I move into the sixth dimension and light a cigarette. As I pause to emulate a dragon, a truck rumbles into the horizon. I can tell the truck has a crackly personality and really wants to be a rebel novelist like Hemingway. At the wheel is a descendant of Bacchus, and if I were on acid, I would plainly see that his hair was made of vines and ivy and if I were to make love to him, his bark would exfoliate my solar plexus. But I'm not on acid, so the son of Bacchus and the offspring of the gods is just a man, a man with Shirley Temple ringlets plastered to his Adonis head and parted above sea-green eyes that have witnessed the meaning of universal love. The crackly truck/Hemingway novelist and the godson Greek slide up beside me and kiss my aura. In English he has learned from *The Twilight Zone* and Perry Mason re-runs he offers me a ride. I climb into the cab and my senses are delighted with the soothing, soft, supple vinyl seat and the sixties style instrument panel. The man smiles a sweet honest grin and instantly I know that he is my savior, my knight, my Captain Marvel, my gourmet ten-course French dinner which includes: caviar, escargot, roast baby lamb, every fresh fruit in the world that explodes when you bite vehemently into it and afterwards fucks your tongue, and a crystal, diamond, tinkling flute of champagne. My heart takes a vacation and goes surfing in my throat.

We arrive in a white-washed, byzantium, babylonian fishing village of which every travel brochure photographer has captured and clichéd so that a dreamy, sad housewife in Butte, Montana can put her nose to the glass of the travel agency next door to Bob's Bar and almost feel the crystalline Aegean lapping at her toes. Captain Marvel, otherwise known as Theo, escorts me to a low ceilinged, teak panelled, ouzo filled taverna that sits and smokes its pipe on stilts over the azure dyed sea. We sit on the bar contemplating Aristotle, fly fishing, and what do you think of John Irving? as the ouzo tumbles down our pipes and courts our blood with extreme persistence. Theo makes the sun slink away and the taverna is impregnated with drink starved locals. Suddenly I'm dancing on the tables, on the bar, on the roof, and I'm not the fiddler, but the jolly, rolly albino Swede is—SHAZAMMM, he keeps shouting! The wine jugs are flying from hand to hand, everything is swirling, twirling—where did that satyr come from and why is he dancing with the wood nymph? while the Turkish delight is the tangible music that is getting faster and faster and wilder and wilder and—ARRÊTÉ

Theo casts out a line and I swallow the glint whole and he reels me onto the beach. We melt in the moonlight and dissolve into molecules and then reconstruct each other again. When I see his eyes in the light that is shimmering through the embryonic fluid of the new day, I know he loves me like YOU would love a solitary sunflower in an African field of verdant grass swaying, swaying so serenely to a breeze that's born from a lion's breath.

OVER-IN-OUT

The summer I met Albert I was told I had to repeat the fifth grade. My world had collapsed around me. My friends rejected me. They called me dummy. My parents gave me the love and support I needed. Yet, it felt like the time they put flowers in the ceramic pot I made in the second grade. They told me the pot was wonderful even though it leaked and was grossly lopsided.

That summer I was alone like a soldier in the jungle, ripping away the wild bushes and trees that distorted my path to the sixth grade. I was trying to make sense of my tragedy.

I remember the morning Albert came to our house. I was in my bedroom and holding a sickly baby blue jay in my hand. Its puny, moist head would rub against my palm sending goose pimples down my arm which made me feel wanted.

I kept the bird in an old worn shoe box lined with dry grass. I had taken the baby blue bird from the pine trees that divide two yards, ours and Mr. Lincoln's. The pines stood tall and stern and reminded me of green soldiers standing at attention. My bedroom window provided me a glorious view of these trees, and the morning I took the bird, the cackling of the newly hatched blue jays seduced me into climbing them. I did not think taking one bird would matter. So with slight hesitation, for fear of being caught by Mr. Lincoln, I climbed the pines, and got coated with a thin layer of sap.

When the door bell rang, its loud clanging startled me and I dropped the quivering bird onto the soft carpet. The bird's puny wings tried to flap and its claws could barely support its scraggly body. I heard voices coming from the front door and I recognized Mr. Lincoln's. I knew I was in trouble. Mr. Lincoln was, no doubt, telling my mother to send me to reform school because I climbed his trees. That past spring the scaremonger, as I called him, had threatened me with the horror of reform school. I had made the mistake of cutting through his backyard and crushing a few jonquils. He came running out of his house slapping a newspaper with his massive hand. At first I thought he was shooting at me with a rifle. I could never figure how he made that banging noise with his newspaper and hand. My parents made me weed his garden for a whole month. Mr Lincoln sat in his lounge chair smoking a pipe and drinking grape juice while watching me on my knees in his precious garden.

"Benny, you missed a spot. Over there by the red tulips,"

Mr. Lincoln would say.

He also told me that the next time, and there better not be a next time, he would tell my mother to send me to reform school. He would then proceed with the frightful tales of reform school.

"And every night you have to pick lint off the rugs." He would laugh as I picked his long weeds. I wanted to shove them down his contemptuous throat.

He told me he once taught in a reform school and the only thing the little boys ate were bread crumbs and cod liver oil. I believed every word he said. Mr. Lincoln could put fear in any little boy.

"Benny! COME DOWN HERE PLEASE," my mother yelled.

I panicked. I grabbed the little bird, put him back into the shoe box, placed an elastic around it and sent the box sailing down the laundry shoot.

"Ben, for heaven's sake come down here."

Walking down the stairs, I looked like a prisoner of war on his way to be executed, taking each step slowly, trying to save every minute of freedom I had left. I made loud thumping noises with my feet and pretended that I was stepping on Mr. Lincoln's precious flowers. A crushed flower for every weed pulled! In my mind this was my last chance for revenge before being sent off to reform school. My little boy pride.

Then like a coward, I approached the front door with my head hung toward my feet. I stood in front of the adults with the thought of bread crumbs and water running through my mind.

"Benny, don't you feel well? Lift your head. Mr. Lincoln is here."

I looked up at the old man. He reminded me of a drill sergeant in the Marine Corps. I began to twitch. I thought of which would be worse: reform school or repeating the fifth grade. They were both too much to bear. Then I remembered once hearing my mother tell my father that all Mr. Lincoln needed was a little prune juice. "Constipation is a terrible thing, you know." I started to giggle. My mother's slight pinch on my shoulder told me to stop. Bread crumbs re-entered my mind.

"Ben, this here is my grandson, Albert. He'll be staying with me for a few days. Your mother and I want you two boys to play with each other," Mr. Lincoln said. His voice was commanding.

Then from behind Mr. Lincoln appeared a scrawny little boy with freckles all over his face. He had more freckles than Howdy Doody! He had dark brown hair that hung over immense green eyes

which looked like marbles I kept in my pockets. He wore those new bellbottom pants, and a decal of the Monkees was displayed on his shirt.

"Albert is EIGHT years old," my mother said. She knew I was age sensitive because of my school grade status, and that I wouldn't take kindly to hanging around with a kid two years younger. But her stressing the word eight wasn't in her kindest tone, and that said it all for me. I really didn't care anyway. I was free! I was in the clear! No reform school! No bread crumbs!

"Great, follow me Albert. I'll show you my train set in the basement." I said.

Liberation was so wonderful I even told Mr. Lincoln it was nice to see him again.

"Oh, by the way, Ben, stay out of those pine tress, there is a birds nest in one of them and I'm waiting for the eggs to hatch."

"I bet you missed watching that nest these past few days while you were away in New York," my mother said.

I was shot dead. "Ughm, yes, sir," I said. I hurried toward the basement stairs with Albert by my side. I listened to the conversation my mother was having with Mr. Lincoln.

"This entire thing is a nightmare. I don't know what to do," Mr. Lincoln said.

"Poor Albert. Have you talked to his father yet?"

"Yes, but you know how that goes. He's in Florida and remarried with more kids of his own."

"I'm sure she'll be okay."

"Well, God willing."

"If there is anything we can do..."

"You're doing plenty. Ben entertaining Albert is a big help."

I looked at Albert. He knew I heard the conversation and looked embarrassed. His chin was tucked into his chest and his eyeballs seemed to be on top of his head beating out at me like a lizard. I told him to wait on the basement steps until I called him.

I ran over to the opening of the laundry shoot and picked up the box and opened it. The baby bird lay motionless in the dry grass. I had killed the baby bird. I didn't know what to do. My mother was talking to Mr. Lincoln up on our front porch, and his freckled face, bell-bottomed, scrawny grandson was waiting for me to be his friend. I quickly went into the bathroom and tossed the bird into the toilet and flushed him away. One little feather floated up from the bowl and tickled my nose.

"Hello," Albert called from the steps.

"Okay, Albert, you can come here now." I wiped my eyes

and tried to pretend nothing happened.

"This here is my train set. My dad said he would build the tracks longer someday," I said as I sniffled.

"Groovy," he said. Albert ran around the tracks.

I turned the switch on and the train went around and around the tracks. There'd be other birds I thought as I watched Albert's excitement.

"Where you from?" I asked.

"Rochester."

"Where's that?"

"New York."

"Do you have any matchbox cars?" I asked.

"I have five at home. My mom bought them for me for Christmas. Plus a case for 'em."

"I have thirty upstairs in my bedroom, do you wanna see 'em?" We both ran up the stairs and past the foyer where my mother was scanning the morning mail, and up to the second flight of stairs.

"Benny! Stop your running and don't mess up that room." SLAM! We both sat Indian style across from each other on my bed. I told Albert that I only showed kids who were older my match box collection. I told him I would make an exception this time.

"Gee thanks Benny. You're the coolest."

"This here is the Red Corvette. My favorite one. I held it up to Albert's face.

"WOW! Can I hold it?"

"Just for a second." I let Albert hold it for a few seconds and asked for it back.

"My mom bought that one for me because it's my favorite. I love the Red Corvette one," Albert said.

I quickly put the car back in the case and slid it back under my bed.

"What grade are you going in?" he asked.

"Sixth, I'm going into the sixth grade. They wanted to promote me to the seventh, but my mom said no."

"WOW! You must be really smart!"

"I can jump out my window," I said. I wanted to change the subject.

"No way. I dare ya," Albert said.

"Watch this." I walked over to the window like a brave soldier getting ready to jump out of an airplane and opened it wide. I swung my feet over the ledge and hung out the window.

"All I got to do is place my feet on the ledge of the chimney.

See?" Albert hung his head out the window and looked at my dangling feet. I soon found the support I needed and jumped on the ledge and slid to the ground.

"WOW, YOU'RE THE COOLEST BENNY!"

"SHHHHHH! Be quiet." I then ran around to the front door opening it slowly. I peeked inside. All clear. My mom was over the sink peeling potatoes. Just as I walked in she turned.

"Benny. I hope you're behaving yourself with that boy. His mother is sick."

"Yes, mom we're just goofing around."

"Good. Because Mr. Lincoln has to go back to New York for a few days and Albert is staying with us."

That night Albert and I slept in my giant walk-in closet. We pretended that it was an army fort and we were under attack. The only way out was through the window. I had taken a flashlight earlier from my dad and when I was sure the enemy, my parents, were sleeping, I opened the closet door and shined the light on the window.

"I don't think I can, Benny."

"Just follow me, soldier. I'll go first." I showed Albert how to shine the light right on the chimney. I then swung myself around, found my footing, and slid down the ledge. I was soon on the ground and in the night air.

"Throw me the light," I whispered loudly.

The light smashed in among the sticky old pine needles. When I found all the batteries that fell around me, my hands were coated with sap. I shined the light on my bedroom window. Albert, as brave as could be, was already hanging out the window. His slippers fell off his feet and hit me in the face. I giggled as his small body slid off the ledge and onto the crunchy pines needles.

"OUCH."

"Well done soldier. Follow me. We have some birds to save."

Albert put on his slippers and in the cool darkness we walked over to the pines. They looked taller at night and the darkness made them look mysterious and forbidden. We stood under the pines and looked up. I shined the light through the tree where the blue jay nest sat. The branch that held the nest looked like a big hairy arm expanding toward the night stars. My eyes suddenly became distracted by a light turned on in the front of my house.

"THE ENEMY HAS FOUND US!" I said.

Albert froze with a look of horror on his eyes.

"Follow me. RUN!" I said.

We ran into the darkness toward the back porch of my house. If we were quick enough we could get in the back door that led to the kitchen. No one would know we were outside. Then, like a grenade going off in my mind, I remembered my father always locked all the doors at night. I ran faster.

"Please door be open, please door be open!" When I reached the door I grabbed the knob.

"Dear god please! Yes! It's open!" I ran into the kitchen. I shut the door. I looked at Albert. He was covered with pine needles. He was puffing. I was huffing. I quickly brushed him off. Then, like a spy, I had to think fast. I sat Albert down in a chair. I took off my slippers that were coated with sticky needles and shoved them under the table. I ran over to the cabinet and got some cookies, and told Albert to stop breathing so loudly. My father entered the kitchen like a General into a barracks.

"Gee fellas, why didn't you answer when we called you?"

"Oh, we didn't hear you. We're just having a little snack," I said.

"Little snack," puffed Albert.

"Okay, fellas, shut the light off and Benny, for God's sake, wear your slippers!"

"Goodnight dad." My father left the kitchen.

"WOW! That was close. You sure know how to handle 'em. You're the coolest guy I know," Albert said.

"You just gotta know what to say," I boasted.

Albert looked at me with awe. He thought I was the coolest kid he knew so I decided to take advantage of it. It wasn't so often that somebody thought I was so cool and smart, so I continued in the spirit of the adventurous night.

"Last year I ran away to this ah, jungle, and rode on the back of this elephant, and lions and monkeys followed me all around. I swung from the trees and ate coconut cream pies like Gilligan."

Albert believed every word I said. I just continued to talk. My ego was a balloon and Albert was the helium. I was floating.

"Can I hold the Red Corvette while I sleep, Benny?"

"How come?"

"Cause I just wanna."

'What a strange kid,' I thought. But he really looked like he wanted to, or needed to. So I got the red car for him. He then wiggled into his bag and grasped onto the car so tightly I saw the whites of his knuckles.

"Why's your mom sick?" I asked.

"She talks funny. I don't like it because it scares me at night. But she said not to think about anything bad so I think about Disney World before I sleep. So goodnight Benny."

"We're brave soldiers. We don't say goodnight, we say over-in-out like we were talking from walkies," I said.

"Over-in-out, Benny."

The next day was filled with wild adventure. We played war with branches we broke off of bushes and used for guns. I was the enemy and Albert hid from me. When I caught him we wrestled in the dirt and I won. He wasn't even sore at me. He just continued to tell me I was the coolest kid he knew. We built a small fort behind the garage from scrap wood and I jumped on the roof of the fort with Albert inside. We both got crushed underneath and I cut my knee. We both agreed it was the greatest thing we ever did. We sat on the front porch steps and I showed Albert my glass ant house. He sat on one side of the glass house and I sat on the other. Albert's eyes were magnified by the glass and I was distracted by their bigness. I kept looking up, and looking at his eyes. They twitched while following the ants digging for their space in the world. Albert did not notice me, or anything around him. For a moment it seemed that all that existed was Albert and the ants.

When the heat of the summer day turned to a cool afternoon breeze we heard the ringing of the ice cream man. We chased the white truck up the street and bought Star-Ship cones which added more goo to our bloody and dirty clothing. For supper that night my mother made spaghetti and I suggested to Albert that we pretend we were eating a plate of worms. My mother told me she would pretend that she had a well behaved, well mannered little boy. I wasn't little, I was eleven, I quickly reminded her. I showed Albert how to hang spaghetti off a fork and told him to open his mouth wide and to just drop the worms in his mouth full force. Albert did what I told him and clumsily covered himself in tomato sauce.

That night we washed away the day's grime and put on clean crisp pajamas. We sat on our sleeping bags in front of the television and watched the Lassie show. We ate popcorn and drank orange soda, and when my parents weren't looking I threw popcorn at Albert and he threw some back. I had my bowl of popcorn by my side, my new friend was sitting next to me, and the feelings of love and home were alive within me.

That evening when we lay in our sleeping bags half sleeping

Albert asked me to hold my hand out.

"Spit in it," he told me. I did what I was told.

Albert then spit in his hand and rubbed our two slimy hands together until they were dry and slightly sticky.

"Now we're best friends, Benny. Over-in-out."

It had happened so quickly that I just remember the tone of voices. The solemn voice of my mother who told me to help pack Albert's bags. The voice of Mr. Lincoln's that wasn't commanding anymore, but rather defeated. And then there was the voice of my best friend Albert as we packed his bags.

"Next time I come I'll bring the Red Corvette then we'll have two to play with."

"Albert, I never was in a jungle before. And I kinda get in trouble a lot around here, I'm not that cool. I'm being kept back I'm going into the fifth—"

"Benny, you jump out windows, you're the coolest guy I know. Over-in-out."

I stood alone in my bedroom until I heard the front door close. I ran over to the window and looked out. Mr. Lincoln held Albert's hand as they both started to walk toward the pines. I opened the window.

"Albert! HEY! OVER-IN-OUT! OVER-IN-OUT!"

He turned and looked up at me, and disappeared under the pines. I wanted to jump out and save him, from what I wasn't quite sure; but I didn't. I just sat there looking out the window staring at the empty space where my best friend had just stood. I tried to hear the cackling of the blue jays, but all I heard was the wistful wind of autumn's approach.

8 BALL BACK

I was on fire that night—I couldn't miss. 6 ball. 4 ball side. 8 ball back. It didn't matter who I was playing or what I was shooting. Everything worked. I beat Steve McGuire and Paul, Vic the Stick and some brown haired guy in blue jeans. Then I beat Billy MacDonald who always rattles me, and when I beat Leo running seven in a row, Harry in a breath swiped his tips off the mahogany, closed the office, clicked off the front neon and pulled up ringside.

I've been coming here once a week for six years making deliveries to Harry Dugan, playing a little pool after the work is done—and I never had it going like this before. Sometimes I hit some good shots and everything, but never like this. I mean, Leo Brodsky hadn't been beat in two years. He's the king around here, the legend. People adore him, respect him. Even the college kids who drift in know if they draw the guy with the forearms and the big blocky neck and that little blond thing of a mustache, the game is going to be just as long as Leo wants it. And anytime some steamshot from outside comes in and tries the hustle, the rallying cry is always, "Call Leo."

And Leo's such a good guy that if someone calls, he comes down, twelve, one o'clock at night—it doesn't matter. Leo padding around his apartment in his pajamas trying to find his keys, telling his wife Etti he's "gotta go down to the Snake" and help out his pals. Leo gets down here, maybe still wearing his pajamas, and the hustler takes a look at him and thinks he's got it made, 'til he sees Leo shoot. Then it's over, and Leo's back in bed like a big teddy bear.

People here know about Leo Brodsky; they have stories about him, especially Harry. Harry and Leo. They're the guys that make this place, the ones who made me feel like making this my last stop of the week. They have that kind of closeness that only time can to make. Grew up together. Probably skipped school together. And the rumor is that Harry is just as good as Leo, but no one's seen him play; except maybe Gina and she's not saying. Don't know why. Guess it's just one of those things. But Harry loves to hunker down to the table and eye a real good pool game. He lives for that kind of thing, the competition, the strategy, the bets. Harry loves it all like a junkie, like a connoisseur.

So when my 8 ball scooted in the corner to beat Leo, and Leo grinned that little grin of his to say, "Hey, Teddy, nice game," Harry stopped pouring drinks and telling stories, and asked Gina to close

the drapes, shut off the front light. He was through working for the night. The Rattlesnake Lounge was closing at ten o'clock on a Friday night. Snowing outside, that's what Harry kept saying, "Gina, honey better close her up—it's snowing outside."

Harry always says something like that, to let his regulars know he's closing the Snake to the public cause he wants to watch the pool games, take some bets and enjoy himself. Some nights Harry'll say, "Gina, I think it's gonna get real dark tonight, better close her up," or "Gina, the Sox lost again tonight. I think we all better go home and say a prayer for them." Then he'll close the bar and walk around telling new patrons that it's time to go. Some of the regulars might even get up and put on their coats, just to make it look good. If he has to, Harry will dim the lights, the new people will leave, the drapes will close and the front sign will be shut off. The neighborhood, of course, will stay, and the lights will go back on and the bar will open. At times like this, if Harry's in a good mood, Gina will bring you two beers for the price of one. If you're drinking scotch or bourbon, and if Harry gives the OK, Gina'll bring you the whole bottle and settle with you later, just so Harry won't be bothered while he's handling the bets, games and shots; all kinds of odds.

I've seen Harry do this only a handful of times. For him to close down the Snake and wipe the chicken parm special off the board, someone has to be really cooking. On fire. Harry calls it "the stuff, the juice, the jic," and he's always looking for it. He told me once—down in the basement where the little kid hand prints and "Harry, Stella 1953" are preserved in the concrete right below the pictures of his dad—that it's not just watching pool that he loves. He said, "Teddy it's the hot shooting that I love, the hotness of it all. The magic. And it doesn't matter whether it's pool or basketball or softball or driving a car or talking some great idea. It's the moment when someone's on fire doing something ordinary, but doing it extra fuckin' good. That's what it's all about for me. And I see it everywhere Teddy. It's all around us—you just gotta watch for it."

Dickie Pays was up next. He was smoking those goddamn Luckys and blowing smoke like a furnace. Someone was banging on the front door, trying to get in.

"Gina, can you turn the juke up. I can't hear it. C'mon Gean, is that the Everly Brothers or Michael J.?"

"Hey, Lou, c'mon in outta the snow," the back table yelled. Lou Casey and his wife, Barbara, were at the door. A snowball sailed across the room and skidded across the shiny brown table where Olson and Maggie were playing cards. "Friggin' Lou."

I sank the 3 and the 4 off the break, and I was off and running. Dickie is one helluva softball player, but he can't shoot pool. I don't know what it is with him, maybe a mental block or something. "2-to-1, Dickie makes at least four," Harry announced, winking at me.

"Shit, Har, Dickie's not gonna' make two the way Ted is shootin'. Here's five."

"Hey Harry, can I bet on myself?"

"Sure Dick. It's constitutional, this is a party, you can do whatever."

"And if I win," Dickie continued, "are you guys gonna take me to Disneyland?"

"Wonderland, Dickie. We'll take you to fuckin' Wonderland."

The 6 ball rattled in. I was still hot. It felt good—the guys sitting around watching. I remember when I was a kid, I don't know, maybe eleven or twelve. I was at the carnival with my cousins, Fred and Richie, and I started playing this game where you throw rings over sticks. Somehow I got the knack and started winning things; y'know, plastic spears, stuff like that. I kept doing it, and kept winning. My cousins were going nuts, and the carny didn't know what to do, an eleven year old kid taking all this stuff. I just kept throwing those rings, and a crowd gathered and cheered me on. I kept winning 'til I won this big stuffed giraffe, and the carny says I gotta go now cause he doesn't have any more prizes. The crowd was cheering, and my cousins lifted me on their shoulders and carried me around with this huge, stuffed giraffe sitting on my head, 'cause I got no way of carrying it with all the other stuff I won. I always remember that, keep it with me. I never had that feeling again, until now.

Harry knew it too. He winked at me after each shot, as if he understood, sitting there with a bag of pistachios, a smile on his face like a fat man at a full table and his entourage around him. Harry's like a guru sometimes, just watching and smiling and taking it all in.

I dropped the 8 ball and Dickie was done.

"Marly, you're up," someone shouted.

Harry threw back his head like he just snapped awake, and bellowed, "Ah Marlita! Marlita's up! Hey Marlita, you're up! Your quarters have found their way past all this carnage. Joseph and Mary, we're gonna see some shootin' now. It's a lucky night, Snakers!"

I tipped my beer just enough for a sip.

"Who's Marly?" I asked Harry.

"You'll see."

"Hey, Marlita Brown, where the hell are ya?" Harry roared.

"I think she's in the bathroom."

"Hey, Barb, let Marly know what's going on. I gotta wipe down the magic board. I can feeel some magic coming. God, I love this shit."

I shot the rest of Dickie's balls in, and wondered who Marlita was. Dickie stood next to me, drumming his hands on the table and trying to sing "Some Enchanted Evening."

"Hey, Dick, whatcha drinkin'?" I said, trying to shut him up.

"Whatever. Anything, y'know. My accountant's got me on hold."

"Hey, Dick, I think your accountant just showed," I said, tapping him on the shoulder.

Dickie turned to see his wife, Lizzie, picking her way through the tables.

"Hey, Lizzie, I'm smokin' tonight," Dickie said with a wide body grin.

"I bet you are, honey. You always are," she said. "Let's tango," she added, laughing.

"Hey, where's Leopold?" asked Harry. "He can't miss this one."

"Gina, can I get a bottle of scotch for the Pays?"

"I'm off duty, Teddy—you can get it yourself."

"What?"

"Ya, what do you think? Just 'cause you're shootin' well doesn't mean you have any special privileges," Gina said, giggling.

"I guess not."

"Hey, Marlita, 'bout time," called Harry.

Marlita was slender and dark, shoulder length hair, 26 or 27 years old. She had kind of a banged up nose and big dark eyes. she was harsh looking, and soft and pretty and not so pretty all at once. I don't ever remember seeing someone like this before. I kept looking at her.

"Ted, this is Marlita. She grew up round here with my sister, Stell. Came all the way from Chicago to meet you," Harry said, laughing a little. "Marlita, this guy Teddy Rac's been winning all night. Don't go easy on him."

Marlita laughed.

"No, I'm serious. Give him a run, Marly."

"Har, I haven't played in two years."

"Ringer. She's a ringer," someone yelled.

"All right, maybe only a year," she said, smiling.

"Marlita's 3-to-1 to win," Harry shouted.

The place froze. I think even the jukebox missed a beat. 3-to-1 to win? Marlita? No way was this dark haired mystery three times better than me. What the hell was Harry doing?

"8 ball," I said.

Marlita looked at me and nodded.

Harry was taking money like a banker—fives, tens, twenties. He had his clipboard out, fingers flying. I leaned into the break just right and hit it, *splank*, kissing the 9 ball into the corner. Leo told me that sometimes a good break makes all the difference in a game. You knock two or three in right off the bat, and it opens up the table. When I beat him, I made only one off the break, but I opened up the table pretty good. Marlita dropped three, then missed a tricky combo, and all of a sudden everything was right there for me.

The 11 was a clean shot and I made it, but then I didn't have much and shot lamely at the 13. Missed.

"Hey, Leo, where ya been? This is gonna be a good one."

"Watching the weather, Harry. I gotta get up tomorrow and plow."

"Can ya stay?"

"Are you kidding?" Leo said, tumbling down next to Harry like a giant cinder block. Harry slapped Leo on the shoulder.

Marlita and Leo smiled at each other.

She lined up her shot and popped the 4 in the corner like it had been thrown out of a cannon, like she had been playing her whole life. It's the kind of shot Leo makes if he's in a hurry, the wife wanting him to come home. Or if he's bored and just wants to get the game over with, cue ball hitting the object ball square like a hammer on a nail and, *bang*, sending it on its way. With that kind of shot, once the cue ball hits the object ball, somehow it never moves. It just sits there waiting for the next shot.

Marlita sank the 5 the same way, and eased up on the 7 just enough for it to trickle in. The card games and laughter and noise stopped. People started to get up and move toward the table. She comboed the 2-1, and got the 2 off the bank. She was sizzling. It was beautiful to watch—lining her shots up, making it work, eyes focused, taut forearms. Harry and Leo sat there watching like a couple of kings.

Marlita had the 3 and 6 left before she got to the 8. Luckily for me, the 3 was in the middle of the pack. She'd need a helicopter to get at it. The 6 was the only shot. She circled the table looking at it, cocking her head, bending her knees to look again. She couldn't knock it in at either side, and she had no straight shot on any of the

corners. She could try to bank it off the far left corner, but that was almost impossible. She'd have to bank it just right, thread it past the 12 and 14, and if she miss-hit at all, the 8 ball was just off the mouth of the pocket. I didn't even see that shot at first, 'til I knew Marlita was looking at it.

"Hit a safety, Marly," someone said.

"Just tap it lightly."

Marlita didn't say anything. She just kept circling, looking at the bank shot like she couldn't get it out of her head.

"It's a black cat," Billy Macs said.

If she knocked in the 8 ball, it was over. She had played too good to lose like that. The whole place knew it. Harry and Leo didn't say anything.

Marlita kept looking at the corner, bending, squinting, trying to figure it out—looking at the 8 ball, hovering over it, her black hair and black turtleneck over the black ball, dark eyes staring. She straightened and twisted her face. She was going to try.

The Rattlesnake had stopped.

"What are the odds, Harry?"

"No odds, nothing. Just watch."

I took a sip of beer, and held it in my mouth a while before I swallowed. Marlita was suddenly frozen over the cue ball, back straight, eyes and head forward and down, leaning.

The cue ball left her stick smoothly, hit the cushion and veered left toward the corner. It whisked past the 12, shaved the 14, and nailed the 6. *Bang.* Pocket.

Harry was up like a rocket.

"Yeah!"

The Rattlesnake shook. One shot. One beautiful shot and people were up, clapping, roaring, stomping their feet. Marlita looked slightly surprised but didn't smile. She quickly re-chalked and safetied the 3, sending it into the pack.

I had one more chance. I squeaked the 10 in the side, pried the 12 loose into the corner, and nailed the 14. I was still hitting. I found the 15 on the rail and hit it toward the corner. It dropped. Everyone was standing. I had one ball left, the 13.

"The corner, Ted," Leo offered.

It was right there for me again. I wanted the 13, the 8 and the stuffed giraffe. I took my time, breathed out and tickled the 13 just right. It went in.

"Yeah!"

I felt the crowd moving closer. I had to keep it together. The 8 ball was do-able—I just had to figure out the right shot. The side

was a scratch and so was the low right corner. It had to go off the bank, low left. Head down—I can do it. My body just wanted to get it over with but my mind was saying, “Slow down, Teddy.” I don’t remember the faces, the crowd, nothing. I’m bending over, eying the cue and letting it go, hitting the 8 nicely, off the curb, sailing toward the pocket. Somehow it doesn’t go in—rattling off the mouth, kicking back out and settling where it stopped. I heard the groans, and saw Marlita coming up to the table, dark eyes locking.

I leaned back against the brown panelled wall and watched her. It felt good standing in the eye of all this. Feeling that I was part of something that makes people get out of their chairs and move closer, makes them shout. I was part of it and so was Marlita, and we were making it go and people wanted to touch it, touch us, like we were magic. I took a sip of beer.

Marlita quickly slammed the 3 ball into the side, wiping it off the table like it was a mosquito, like it wasn’t ever really there. The cue ball and the 8 stayed in the middle of the table, on different halves, about four feet from each other. The 8 would have to be a bank shot. Not easy.

Marlita arched her eyebrows and chalked the stick. People were huddled together, everybody standing except Harry and Leo. Victor was crouched on the radiator, gnawing at his hands. There wasn’t any music. Marlita looked towards Harry and Leo for a signal—a wink, a nod, anything. Nothing. Harry and Leo leaned towards each other, looking at the table without blinking, seeing only the shiny white cue ball and the black 8 ball. Marlita leaned over, without taking a breath or hesitating, *smack*, cue ball slamming into the 8 ball which gathered speed and leaped off the bank—black cat became a black dog, “8 ball heel,” into the back left pocket.

The Snake let out one big beery breath, and then snapped upward, outward. They were all screaming. I remember their eyes, Gina, Billy Macs, and Lou’s—everyone stomping and clapping, throwing their arms up high. I’m a little stunned at first. But somehow I start clapping, and it’s like I won, people pounding me on the back, saying, “Unbelievable!” and “Great game!” I look through the hands and arms, and Harry and Leo are hugging Marlita, the three of them waving to me, grinning and then hugging me when I join them. Harry and Leo danced around, and Harry said something to Marlita about “home” and “he can’t hurt ya here.” Then Harry yelled, “Drinks on the house!” and a few guys in the back screamed, “Rattlesnake! Rattlesnake! Rattlesnake!” Someone opened the side door to let the cool air slide in. I looked at Marlita and she smiled at me, and said something about “back” and “shot,”

and smiled some more. Then we moved toward the door through the crowd, cool air hitting our faces. I turned to see Harry, and winked at him—he winked back. Then we moved outside, Marlita and me—into the cold, into the night, and opened our mouths, melting the big white flakes on our tongues.

WAKING HER

My sister Clara twisted a lock of her blond hair around her finger. She'd been doing it all weekend at our grandmother's house in New Hampshire, where we went most weekends. My grandmother's name was Birdy, short for Brigitte. "Stop touching your hair Clara," she'd said. "A twenty-two-year-old shouldn't be putting her hands all over her head like that." Birdy'd been in a terrible mood, snapping at us and complaining. She'd given up driving and found herself completely isolated when she couldn't get to the library, a friend's house or one of the shopping malls on the highway near Nashua. Clara's elbow now rested on the open car window. Her fingers pulled at her hair until the wind stole it back and whipped strands around her face.

"Roll up your window," I said, from the driver's seat. "It's getting cold."

"Something smells like burnt rubber," she said. Smoke began to rise from the corners of the blue hood of the Ford belonging to Birdy. "Don't stop until we get to an exit. There's no one around."

"Look at the temperature gauge," I said, pulling into the emergency lane.

"Could the engine blow?" she asked.

"It's just over-heated. Let go of your hair. I'm as nervous as you are."

I turned off the car and got out. When I lifted the hood thick steam rolled over my bare arms. Through the windshield I stared at Clara's watchful green eyes. Her wide, rosy cheekbones and proud pinched nose were pink from too much sun. She laughed briefly, leaned back against the seat and asked, "What do we do now?"

"We need water for the radiator."

She looked out her window toward the scarred granite along the highway, the smooth vertical ridges drilled to hold dynamite when the road was first built. There were miles of purple lustrife, clover and black-eyed Susans scattered over miniature cliffs, but no cars in sight. "I hope some weirdo doesn't pull up," she said. "I knew we shouldn't have come here this weekend. It's getting crazy, baby-sitting an old lady like this."

I went toward her window thinking of all the times Birdy had watched us when we were little, taken us to the Arboretum, and picnics to the harbor islands. "Why don't you get the hell out and

help me," I said.

On the other side of the highway, behind a chain-link fence and a row of willow trees with leaves like confetti, I saw a chimney and part of a gray slate roof. "We can ask for water over there." I pointed at the trees.

We left the car and began to cross the winding gray highway, abandoned because it was Sunday. A truck carrying Sunbeam Bread flew past us so that our hair whipped around our faces and temporarily blinded us. I thought of Birdy, whose house we'd left an hour ago. If she'd succeeded in convincing us to bring her to Boston, we would have had to leave her in the car or somehow drag her across these lanes. She never would have made it over the median strip, the tall grass and silver fence that snaked along the highway for miles. Her heart had weakened in the last few months. We cleaned and cooked for her on weekends and showed her how to slow down because she was always doing something in the garden; lifting pots and tools that were too heavy. Lately she'd had a hard time holding things, moving her fingers, forming words. We were sure she'd had a small stroke but she wouldn't admit it. When we told our parents, who live in Florida, they insisted on hiring a nurse, part-time at least, regardless of how Birdy felt or what she wanted to do. So that's what we'd been dealing with.

We walked along a path worn through tall, tawny grass until we came to a hole in the fence. Beyond the willows we could see the white farm house with black shutters and a screened-in porch, and a barn and corral that must have held live stock at one time. Seven or eight cars crowded the back lawn.

"I don't think we should bother these people," said Clara, following behind me.

"They probably help people all the time, living next to the highway like this."

"Maybe," she said. "But it looks like they have guests."

A german shepherd, with awfully long canines, came out from behind one of the cars and crouched to the ground.

"My God," said Clara, "look at the size of him." The chain dragged, he lunged halfheartedly and snapped back. Then he let out a discouraged whine and crept back behind the car. "Let's just use that faucet and leave," said Clara, grabbing my shoulder and pointing to a rusty spigot, attached to the side of the house.

"We don't have a container. Will you let go of me! I don't want to knock on a stranger's door any more than you do." I walked up the steps to the back door and rang the bell. No one answered so I rang again. Clara crossed her arms tightly to her chest and with the

tip of her sneaker poked at a large June bug laying on its back.

"It's going to get dark," she mumbled. "Then we'll be stuck on the highway fidgeting with the car. Maybe we should just call a tow."

"There have to be people here." I knocked on the wooden door. "Lights are on in the house; look at all these cars."

She tried the bell this time, poking at the buzzer like she was tapping someone on the shoulder. Suddenly a man opened the door and stared at us. He was young, my age, twenty-six, dressed in a navy pin-striped suit and maroon tie. He took in our denim shorts and T-shirts with his wary, indigo eyes.

"Hi," I said. "Sorry to bother you but—"

"Your car broke down," he interrupted.

"Actually we just need water. It's overheated."

He looked out to the field and squinted at the row of pines in the distance, then moved his eyes to the right toward the highway beyond the willows. It was here that I really noticed the slender, straightness of his nose; I imagined running my finger along it. His top lip was larger than his bottom lip—stuck in a sort of permanent pout. "It's just that we have guests."

"Give us a container," I said. "We'll use the faucet outside."

"No, come in." He opened the door. "I'm sorry."

We followed him through a narrow, moss-green hallway with big old-fashioned brass hooks on which hung canvas jackets and various rain slickers. Clara, who was behind me, put one hand on my shoulder and pulled me to her.

"I have to go to the bathroom," she whispered.

"Wait until we get to the highway."

"I don't think I can."

I shrugged her hand off my shoulder, wishing she wouldn't always paw at me. It must go back to when we were little and sometimes, if our parents were out, I'd have to help her dress, feed her, entertain her. She'd been good this weekend. She'd helped Birdy, who was so needy and always complained about people. Clara didn't like her complaints. She thought they hid Birdy's true discomfort: the food that upset her stomach, her aching joints.

We went into a big kitchen filled with old, white, mismatched chairs, wooden cabinets and a bulky black cooking stove with Glenwood in silver letters. All sorts of food covered the counters and tables: cookies, fruit breads and pies, tuna casserole with peas, lasagna, fried chicken and potato salad. Clara raised her brow to me and I licked my lips. This man, whose name I didn't know, pulled open a cabinet under the sink and searched for a

container. He didn't look at us, didn't ask any questions. I would have liked to sit down with him and have a cup of tea. I'd find out who he was. But he didn't offer us anything.

"I'm Peg," I said, finally. "This is my sister Clara."

"Ruben," he said, reaching his arm into a broom closet, searching around.

"A gallon milk container would be best," I said.

"No. There's nothing here."

His dress shoes were shiny and a deep brown, like the outside of a chestnut. When he turned from us Clara snatched an oatmeal cookie.

"Don't!" I mouthed. She'd already stuffed it into her mouth; crumbs stuck to her pink T-shirt.

"I'll have to look around in my workshop or in the barn," said Ruben. "Wait here." He left through the hallway, toward the big oak door, shuffling in his big brown shoes.

"What a depressed soul," I whispered. "Obviously we've inconvenienced the hell out of him."

"Cute though," said Clara. "What would you do if two good looking *guys* came to your door? Ignore them and not even look them in the face? Shit! He could have offered us something to drink."

I picked up potato salad smothered in mayonnaise, ate it and licked my fingers. Clara ate more cookies and a hand full of cheese puffs which turned her fingers fluorescent-orange. "I've always wanted to do this at those old-lady-church-bazaars Birdy used to take us to," I confessed, picking a pimento out of an olive. "What a stickler she is for etiquette."

"She'll hassle anybody about anything when she gets a chance."

"True," I said.

"She's gotten worse and worse, Peg. She's just impossible. And here we are going back and forth to New Hampshire! You know she's going to have to go to a home soon, even if Mom and Dad have to fly up here." We kept picking at food until Clara said she couldn't wait anymore and had to find a bathroom.

With the fading of her footsteps came a noise from another room, the creaking sound of people moving in an old house and whispering whole conversations. I wondered if there was some kind of party or meeting being held. But it was too quiet, too many long pauses between voices.

I stared at a pile of different-sized wishbones strung together on a nail next to the window. A strange seed had sprouted in a cup

near the sink and a sign above the stove said: "The mess you make in this house is yours to clean." Birdy's kitchen was a little like this, but more cluttered. It had been getting very dirty because she couldn't clean anymore. Bacon grease covered the stove. In the toaster she'd been using we found the charred body of a mouse. Who knows how long it had been there, and how many pieces of raisin cinnamon toast had accompanied that mouse. She didn't even smell it.

Clara came back into the kitchen, her mouth open, eyes glassy and still.

"What?" I said.

"There's a dead body in a coffin in the living room," she whispered. "And people sitting around it."

"Give me a break!" I said.

"I'm serious Peg. I could see this old lady's small head on a satin pillow. Everyone's dressed up, like Ruben."

"Jesus," I said. "All that food. We've walked in on a wake."

"Should we tell him we know when he comes back?"

"No," I said, "let's just get out of here."

"We can't. The car." She began to pick at the cheese puffs again. I asked her how old the dead lady was. "Old. In her seventies or eighties. She looked like wax with all that make up."

I'd gone into Birdy's room a couple of times, in the morning, to wake her. I'd stand over her, waiting for her chest to rise, for her eye lids to move. I'd imagined, once or twice, that she'd died in the night. When I reached out, expecting to feel cold, hard skin she'd open her eyes and ask me what time it was or why I'd let her sleep in so late.

"I want to see what she looks like," I said to Clara.

"Why?" she asked. "She's just a dead old lady in a coffin. Besides, the sun is going down; we'll never be able to see the radiator."

"Just a quick look."

She led me past a staircase covered with a scarlet rug and into a dining room with a grand piano in one corner and a long table set with silver in the center. Clara took me to sliding doors which opened just enough for us to see into the adjoining room where the old woman lay.

"Hurry and look," she said. "He may come back to the kitchen and find us gone and then come looking for us."

I put my eye to the crack and looked into a sitting room lined with bookshelves; Orientals overlapped each other. I hadn't quite believed Clara until I saw the woman's face, her silver dress

and the white, satin sheet covering most of her. Her hair, or wig, was silver too and the skin of her face, except for two pink dots on her cheeks, was gray and lusterless like an old canvas sneaker.

"They're waking her," I said.

Clara grabbed my sleeve, catching skin and pinching me. I elbowed her. "Just a few more seconds." And then I stared at sad, weeping faces, empty fists and stiff backs.

When we got back to the kitchen Ruben still had not come back.

"Should we look for him in the barn?" asked Clara. "It's been twenty minutes."

"What would we say?"

"I don't know but I have to be at the restaurant early tomorrow."

I worked in a library and could take a sick day if I had to. But it was always hard for Clara to find someone to take her shift.

On a wooden cutting board near the stove I saw a beige tupperware container filled with something green. I opened it, grabbed a spoon from the sink and quickly scraped out lime Jell-O and miniature marshmallows into the garbage, and covered it with a napkin; then I filled the container with water. Clara was already standing in the doorway making sure the hall was clear.

We left, quietly closing the heavy door behind us. We passed the cars, went through tall grass, and found the path made by strangers.

"Where do you suppose he went?" asked Clara as we ducked through the opening in the chain-link fence.

"Who knows? I kind of feel bad for him."

"I wonder who she was?"

"His mother or grandmother," I said. "Maybe an old aunt."

"She was old, whoever she was, and ready to go."

We walked through purple flowers and Queen Anne's lace, over pieces of disintegrating toilet paper left by commuters.

"I wished we'd known," I said, hugging the tupperware to my chest, trying not to spill any water. "We could have looked for a container and let him go back to the wake."

Clara reminded me that we were supposed to call Birdy when we got to the city. "I hate calling her," she said. "She won't let you off the phone, and then everything is a complaint and all you can say is 'I know, I know.' or 'It'll get better,' or something phony."

"She's lonely," I said. "She just wants to hear our voices. She knows she can't live alone in that house for much longer." We began to cross the highway.

"Why do you suppose Mom and Dad don't deal with it?" she asked.

"Too close. Too sad. Maybe they see themselves getting old."

"I think it has to do with her sending them those old photos of their wedding and the recent photos of them she took a couple years ago. You know, seeing themselves young and hopeful and then having to look at photos of themselves thirty years later."

"That's ridiculous," I said, wondering why it was she could be so simple sometimes. We reached the car and I opened the radiator without it hissing at me. I poured the water in, closed the hood and started the car.

We drove about a half mile, and then I saw a figure ahead of us on the highway, crossing the white line. I knew immediately that it was Ruben because of the dark suit and the black and tan dog on a leash. Cars would have had to swerve to avoid hitting him.

"Look!" said Clara. "It's that guy Ruben. Don't stop!"

"That's rude," I said, pulling the car over. I slowed down in front of him and stopped.

"Remember us?" I said, looking back at him through my open window. His tie was loosened and lopsided over his opened collar.

"You're the girls who were looking for water." He rubbed his hand down over his face, over his mouth, and sighed. "I was going to get you a container but, I don't know, Barney started whimpering behind a car. I guess I got side tracked, forgot where I was going."

"That's okay," I said. "Get in, we'll give you a ride home."

He climbed discretely into the back seat with the dog. I thought maybe he should have had the front seat so Clara and I could keep an eye on him because we didn't know who he was or what shape he was in.

"God, I don't know what to say; I just went blank." He brushed his hand through his hair several times, squeezed a clump in his fist and stared into his lap. "I guess you found a container."

"Look," I said. "We know that someone died; we're terribly sorry."

"We had no idea," said Clara.

I could see, in the mirror, that he was petting the dog. He unclipped the leash and let the dog stick its nose out the window.

"These last few days I sort of forget what I'm doing, where I'm going. I knew you were waiting but suddenly Barney became a bigger problem." He looked down at his lap again and rattled the

leash. "I'm not making sense, am I?"

"Was she your mother?" I asked.

"No, my grandmother. But she raised me."

"How did she die?" asked Clara.

"She had an accident the other morning; no one was there to help her."

I looked in the rear-view mirror again, at the corners of his mouth, drooping like the dog's. Up ahead, there was a break in the guard rail. It was an illegal U-turn but I risked it anyway because I didn't know what to say to comfort this man. I wanted to get him out of the car and back to the wake. The sun had just fallen below the tops of pine and birch trees, sharp rays of sunlight blinded me.

"Did it happen in that house?" asked Clara.

"Yes," He nodded. "I found her two mornings ago. Take this exit here."

We went through lights, down a dirt road and up a long gravel driveway which brought us to the front entrance where more cars were parked under a maple on the front lawn.

"This is fine," he said as we pulled up to the front door. "I'll go around back."

I wanted to ask how his grandmother managed in such a big house, how she'd kept it clean, if she'd had help, if her memory was good. But he'd already opened the door and pulled the dog out.

"Take care," said Clara.

He stopped to look at us with one hand on the door and the other hand limp by his side, holding the leash.

"You want to help me with the dog?" he asked. "I feel a little jittery." But the dog had already scooted around the side of the house with his nose to the ground. Ruben kept staring at me with placid, blue eyes. So I turned off the engine, opened my door and walked around the car where I took his arm in mine. We turned down the path, beside the house. His coat felt scratchy against my bare arm. I tried not to get too close.

"Such a clean house," I said, trying to look through a window but seeing only our reflection. "Did she ever have help? Nursing care or anything?"

"No," he said.

"Was she forgetful?"

"Not particularly."

"What about a stroke?" But we were already on the stairs in front of the door where we'd first met.

"What happened?" I asked.

"She lived here alone." He let go of my arm. "The other

morning she slipped down the stairs and broke her neck."

"God. I'm sorry."

He frowned and opened door. "Thanks," he said solemnly, letting the dog through, and quickly following.

I walked back to the car where Clara was pouting and twisting her hair. I reached my hand out to her.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I walked him to the back door."

"What did he say?"

"He just went inside."

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